WITHDRAWN

CHARLES DICKENS

A CRITICAL STUDY

172

Gadshill Place from the Gardens

CHARLES DICKENS

GEORGE GISSING

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CHARLES DICKENS

CHAPTER I

HIS TIMES

More than forty years have elapsed since the death of Charles Dickens. The time which shaped him and sent him forth is so far behind us, as to have become a matter of historical study for the present generation; the time which knew him as one of its foremost figures, and owed so much to the influences of his wondrous personality, is already made remote by a social revolution of which he watched the mere beginning. It seems possible to regard Dickens from the stand-point of posterity; to consider his career, to review his literary work, and to estimate his total activity, as belonging to an age clearly distinguishable from our own.

When Queen Victoria came to the throne Charles Dickens was twenty-five years old. To say that he was twenty in the year 1832 is to point more significantly the period of his growth into manhood. At least a year before the passing of that Reform Bill which was to give poli-

tical power to English capitalism (a convenient word of our day) Dickens had begun work as a shorthand writer, and as journalist. Before 1837 he had written his *Sketches*, had published them in volumes which gave some vogue to the name of "Boz", and was already engaged upon *Pickwick*. In short, Dickens's years of apprenticeship to life and literature were those which saw the rise and establishment of the Middle Class, commonly called "Great"—of the new power in political and social England which owed its development to coal and steam and iron mechanism. By birth superior to the rank of proletary, inferior to that of capitalist, this young man, endowed with original genius, and with the invincible vitality demanded for its exercise under such conditions, observed in a spirit of lively criticism, not seldom of jealousy, the class so rapidly achieving wealth and rule. He lived to become, in all externals, and to some extent in the tone of his mind, a characteristic member of this privileged society; but his criticism of its foibles, and of its grave shortcomings, never ceased. The landed proprietor of Gadshill could not forget (the great writer could never desire to forget) a miserable childhood imprisoned in the limbo of squalid London; his grudge against this memory was in essence a *class* feeling; to the end his personal triumph gratified him, however unconsciously, as the vindication of a social claim.

Walter Scott, inheriting gentle blood and feudal enthusiasm, resisted to the last the theories of '32; and yet by irony of circumstance owed his ruin to commercial enterprise. Charles Dickens, humbly born, and from first to last fighting the battle of those in like estate, wore himself to a premature end in striving to found his title of gentleman on something more substantial than glory. The one came into the world too late; the other, from this point of view, was but too thoroughly of his time.

A time of suffering, of conflict, of expansion, of progress. In the year of Dickens's birth (1812) we read of rioting workmen who smash machinery, and are answered by the argument of force. Between then and 1834, the date of the Poor Law Amendment Act, much more machinery is broken, power-looms and threshing-engines, north and south; but hungry multitudes have no chance against steam and capital. Statisticians, with rows of figures, make clear to us the vast growth of population and commerce in these same years; we are told, for instance, that between 1821 and 1841 the people of Sheffield and of Birmingham increased by 80 per cent. It is noted, too, that savings-bank deposits increased enormously during the same years: a matter for congratulation. Nevertheless, with the new Poor Law comes such a demand for new workhouses that in some four-and-twenty

years we find an expenditure of five millions sterling in this hopeful direction. To be sure, a habit of pauperdom was threatening the ruin of the country—or of such parts of it as could not be saved by coal and steam and iron. Upon the close of the Napoleonic wars followed three decades of hardship for all save the inevitably rich, and those who were able to take time by the forelock; so that side by side we have the beginnings of vast prosperity and wide prevalence of woe. Under the old law providing for the destitute by means of outdoor relief, pauperdom was doubtless encouraged; but the change to sterner discipline could not escape the charge of harshness, and among those who denounced the new rule was Dickens himself. Whilst this difference of opinion was being fought out, came a series of lean years, failure of harvests, and hunger more acute than usual, which led to the movement known as Chartism (a hint that the middle-class triumph of '32 was by no means a finality, seeing that behind that great class was a class, numerically at all events, much greater); at the same time went on the Corn-law struggles. Reading the verses of Ebenezer Elliott, one cannot but reflect on the scope in England of those days for a writer of fiction who should have gone to work in the spirit of the Rhymer, without impulse or obligation to make his books amusing. But the novelist of homely life was already at

his task, doing it in his own way, picturing with rare vividness the England that he knew; and fate had blest him with the spirit of boundless mirth.

There are glimpses in Dickens of that widespread, yet obscure, misery which lay about him in his early years. As, for instance, where we read in *Oliver Twist*, in the description of the child's walk to London, that "in some villages large painted boards were fixed up, warning all persons who begged within the district, that they would be sent to jail". And in his mind there must ever have been a background of such knowledge, influencing his work, even when it found no place in the scheme of a story.

In a rapid view of the early nineteenth century, attention is demanded by one detail, commonly forgotten, and by the historian easily ignored, but a matter of the first importance as serving to illustrate some of Dickens's best work. In 1833, Lord Ashley (afterwards Lord Shaftesbury) entered upon his long strife with stubborn conservatism and heartless interest on behalf of little children who worked for wages in English factories and mines. The law then in force forbade children under thirteen years of age to engage in such labour for *more* than thirteen hours a day; legislators of that period were so struck by the humanity of the provision that no eloquence could induce them to think of super-

seding it. Members of the reformed House of Commons were naturally committed to sound economic views on supply and demand; they enlarged upon the immorality of interfering with freedom of contract; and, when Lord Ashley was guilty of persevering in his anti-social craze, of standing all but alone, year after year, the advocate of grimy little creatures who would otherwise have given nobody any trouble, howling insult, or ingenious calumny, long served the cause of his philosophic opponents.

Let anyone who is prone to glorify the commercial history of nineteenth-century England search upon dusty shelves for certain Reports of Commissioners in the matter of children's employments at this time of Lord Ashley's activity, and there read a tale of cruelty and avarice which arraigns the memory of a generation content so infamously to enrich itself. Those Reports make clear that some part, at all events, of modern English prosperity results from the toil of children (among them babies of five and six), whose lives were spent in the black depths of coal-pits and amid the hot roar of machinery. Poetry has found inspiration in the subject, but no verse can make such appeal to heart and conscience as the businesslike statements of a Commission. Lord Ashley's contemporaries in Parliament dismissed these stories with a smile. Employers of infant labour naturally would lend

no ear to a sentimental dreamer; but it might have been presumed that at all events in one direction, that of the Church, voices would make themselves heard in defence of "these little ones". We read, however, in the philanthropist's Diary: "In very few instances did any mill-owner appear on the platform with me; in still fewer the representatives of any religious denomination". This quiet remark serves to remind one, among other things, that Dickens was not without his reasons for a spirit of distrust towards religion by law established, as well as towards sundry other forms of religion—the spirit which, especially in his early career, was often misunderstood as hostility to religion in itself, a wanton mocking at sacred things. Such a fact should always be kept in mind in reading Dickens. It is here glanced at merely for its historical significance; the question of Dickens's religious attitude will call for attention elsewhere.

Dickens, if any writer, has associated himself with the thought of suffering childhood. The circumstances of his life confined him, for the most part, to London in his choice of matter for artistic use, and it is especially the London child whose sorrows are made so vivid to us by the master's pen. But we know that he was well acquainted with the monstrous wickedness of that child labour in mines and mills; and, find where he might the pathetic little figures useful

to him in his fiction, he was always speaking, consciously, to an age remarkable for stupidity and heartlessness in the treatment of all its poorer children. Perhaps in this direction his influence was as great as in any. In recognizing this, be it remembered for how many years an Englishman of noble birth, one who, on all accounts, might have been thought likely to sway the minds of his countrymen to any worthy end, battled in vain and amid all manner of obloquy, for so simple a piece of humanity and justice. Dickens had a weapon more efficacious than mere honest zeal. He could make people laugh; and if once the crowd has laughed with you, it will not object to cry a little—nay, it will make good resolves, and sometimes carry them out.

It was a time by several degrees harsher, coarser, and uglier than our own. Take that one matter of hanging. Through all his work we see Dickens preoccupied with the gallows; and no wonder. In his *Sketches* there is the lurid story of the woman who has obtained possession of her son after his execution, and who seeks the aid of a doctor, in hope of restoring the boy to life; and in so late a book as *Great Expectations* occurs that glimpse of murderous Newgate, which is among his finest things. His description of a hanging, written to a daily paper, is said to have had its part in putting an end to public executions; but that was compara-

tively late in his life; at his most impressionable time the hanging of old and young, men and women, regularly served as one of the entertainments of Londoners. Undoubtedly, even in Dickens's boyhood, manners had improved to some extent upon those we see pictured in Hogarth; but from our present stand-point the difference, certainly in poorer London, is barely appreciable. It was an age in which the English character seemed bent on exhibiting all its grossest and meanest and most stupid characteristics. Sheer ugliness of everyday life reached a limit not easily surpassed; thickheaded national prejudice, in consequence of great wars and British victories, had marvellously developed; aristocracy was losing its better influence, and power passing to a well-fed multitude, remarkable for a dogged practicality which, as often as not, meant ferocious egoism. With all this, a prevalence of such ignoble vices as religious hypocrisy and servile snobbishness. Our own day has its faults in plenty: some of them perhaps more perilous than the worst here noted of our ancestors; but it is undeniably much cleaner of face and hands, decidedly more graceful in its common habits of mind.

One has but to open at any page of *Pickwick* to be struck with a characteristic of social life in Dickens's youth, which implies so much that it may be held to represent the whole civilization

in which he was born and bred. Mr. Pickwick and his friends all drank brandy; drank it as the simplest and handiest refreshment, at home or abroad; drank it at dawn or at midnight, in the retirement of the bed-chamber, or by the genial fireside; offered it as an invitation to good-fellowship, or as a reward of virtue in inferiors; and on a coach-journey, whether in summer or winter, held it among the indispensable comforts. "He", said Samuel Johnson, "who aspires to be a hero, must drink brandy"; and in this respect the Pickwickians achieve true heroism. Of course they pay for their glory, being frequently drunk in the most flagrant sense of the word; but to say that they "come up smiling" after it, is to use an inadequate phrase — however appropriate to those times; he would indeed have been a sorry Pickwickian who owned to a morning's headache. If such a thing existed, unavowed, there was the proverbial remedy at hand—"a hair of the dog". It is conceivable that, in an age to come, a student of *Pickwick* may point, as an obvious explanation of the marvellous flow of vitality and merriment among the people of Dickens's day, to their glorious beverage, doubtless more ethereal and yet more potent than any drink known to later mortals—the divine liquor called brandy.

Amid this life of the young century—cruel, unlovely, but abounding in vital force — there

arose two masters in the art of fiction. To one of them was given the task of picturing England on its brighter side, the world of rank and fashion and wealth, with but rare glances (these, however, more noteworthy than is generally recognized) at the populace below. The other had for his field that vast obscurity of lower town life which till then had never been turned to literary uses. Of the country poor, at a somewhat earlier date, admirable presentment had been made in the verse of Crabbe, a writer (in truth the forerunner of what is now called "realism") whose most unmerited neglect may largely be accounted for by the unfortunate vehicle of his work, the "riding-rhyme", which has lost its charm for the English ear; but poverty amid a wilderness of streets, and that class of city population just raised above harsh necessity, no one had seriously made his theme in prose or verse. Thackeray and Dickens supplement each other, and, however wide apart the lives they depict, to a striking degree confirm each other's views of a certain era in the history of England. In their day, both were charged with partiality, with excessive emphasis. Both being avowedly satirists, the charge can be easily understood, and to a certain point may be admitted. In the case of Dickens, with whom alone I am here concerned, it will be part of my endeavour to vindicate him against the familiar complaint that, however trust-

worthy his background, the figures designed upon it, in general, are mere forms of fantasy. On re-reading his work, it is not thus that Dickens's characters, on the whole, impress me. With reserves which will appear in the course of my essay, I believe him to have been, what he always claimed to be, a very accurate painter of the human beings, no less than of the social conditions, he saw about him. He has not a wide scope; he is always noticeably at his best in dealing with an ill-defined order of English folk, a class (or classes) characterized by dulness, prejudice, dogged individuality, and manners, to say the least, unengaging. From this order he chose the living figures of his narrative, and they appear to me, all in all, no less truly representative than the persons selected by Thackeray to illustrate a higher rank of life. Readers of Dickens who exclaim at the "unreality" of his characters (I do not here speak of his conduct of a story) will generally be found unacquainted with the English lower classes of to-day; and one may remark in passing that the English people is distinguished among nationalities by the profound mutual ignorance which separates its social ranks.

One often hears it said that Dickens gives us types, not individuals; types, moreover, of the most abstract kind, something like the figures in the old Moralities: embodied hypocrisy, selfishness, pride, and so on, masking as everyday

mortals. This appears to me an unconsidered judgment. Dickens's characters will pass before us and be attentively reviewed; speaking of them generally, I see in them, not abstractions, but men and women of such loud peculiarities, so aggressively individual in mind and form, in voice and habit, that they for ever proclaim themselves the children of a certain country, of a certain time, of a certain rank. Clothed abstractions do not take hold upon the imagination and the memory as these people of Dickens did from the day of their coming into life. The secret of this subtle power lay in the reality of the figures themselves. There are characters in Dickens (meant, moreover, to be leading persons of the drama) which have failed thus to make good their being; their names we may remember, but all else has become shadowy; and what is the reason of this vanishment, in contrast with the persistence of figures less important? Simply that here Dickens *has* presented us with types, abstractions. The social changes of the last sixty years are not small; but to anyone who really knows the lower middle class in London it will be obvious that many of the originals of Dickens still exist, still pursue the objectionable, or amusing, tenor of their way, amid new names and new forms of ugliness. Sixty years ago, grotesques and eccentricities were more common than nowadays; the Englishman, always angular

and self-assertive, had grown flagrant in his egoism during the long period of combat with menacing powers; education had not set up its grindstone for all and sundry; and persons esteemed odd even in such a society abounded among high and low. For these oddities, especially among the poorer folk, Dickens had an eager eye; they were offered to him in measure overflowing; nowadays he would have to search for them amid the masses drilled into uniformity, but there they are—the same creatures differently clad. Precisely because his books are rich in extravagances of human nature is Dickens so true a chronicler of his day and generation.

A time of ugliness: ugly religion, ugly law, ugly relations between rich and poor, ugly clothes, ugly furniture. What would Charles Dickens have made of all this had his genius been lacking in the grace of humour? Yet it is not his humour alone that will preserve him for the delight of young and old, no less than for the instruction of the studious. In his work there is a core of perpetuity; to find it we must look back upon the beginnings of his life, and on the teaching which prepared him for his life's endeavour.

CHAPTER II

THE GROWTH OF MAN AND WRITER

Needless to recount in detail the biography of Charles Dickens. Living, he was regarded with a warmth of personal interest such as no other English writer ever inspired; all the facts of his life which could rightly become public property (and some with which the public had no concern) were known to every contemporary reader; and as yet they seem in no risk of being forgotten.

By accident he was not born a Londoner, but his life in London began while he was yet a child. His earliest impressions, however, were received at Rochester and Chatham, where he went to what was called a school, and in the time at his own disposal began to educate himself in his own way by reading the eighteenth-century novelists. A happy thing for Dickens, and for us, that he was permitted to pass these few years of opening life elsewhere than in London. He speaks of himself as "not a very robust child sitting in by-places near Rochester Castle, with a head full of Partridge, Strap, Tom Pipes, and Sancho Panza"; better from every point of view, than if he had gained his first knowledge of English life and fiction amid the brick walls of Camden

Town. Dickens always had a true love of the country, especially of that which is near to picturesque old towns of historic interest; and this most precious characteristic, to which we owe some of the sweetest, freshest pages in his work, might never have developed in him but for the early years at Rochester. Very closely has he linked his memory with that district of Kent,—nowadays, of course, like most other districts easily accessible from London, all but robbed of the old charm. At Rochester begin the adventurous travels of Mr. Pickwick; near Rochester stands the house of Gadshill; and it was Rochester that he chose for the scene of his last story, the unfinished *Edwin Drood.*

With London came unhappiness. *David Copperfield* has made universally familiar that figure of the poor little lad slaving at ignoble tasks in some by-way near the River Thames. David works for a wine-merchant, cleaning bottles; his original had for taskmasters a firm of blacking-makers. We know how sorely this memory rankled in the mind of the successful author; he kept the fact from his wife till long after marriage, and, we are told, could never bear to speak to his children of that and the like endurances. This I have seen mentioned as proof of a kind of sensitiveness not to be distinguished from snobbery. Dickens would not, like Josiah Bounderby in *Hard Times*, proclaim from the

house-tops that he had been a poor boy toiling for a few shillings a week, and assuredly he would have preferred to look back upon a childhood like to that of his friends and neighbours; but much of his shrinking from this recollection was due to the fact that it involved a grave censure upon his parents. "It is wonderful to me", he writes, in the fragment of autobiography preserved by Forster (*Life*, Bk. I, chap. 2), "how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age. It is wonderful to me that, even after my descent into the poor little drudge I had been since we came to London, no one had compassion enough on me—a child of singular abilities, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt, bodily or mentally—to suggest that something might have been spared, as certainly it might have been, to place me at any common school. Our friends, I take it, were tired out. No one made any sign. My father and mother were quite satisfied. They could hardly have been more so, if I had been twenty years of age, distinguished at a Grammar School, and going to Cambridge." In this passage the tone of feeling is unmistakable; as the boy had suffered from a sense of undeserved humiliation, so did the man feel hurt in his deepest sensibilities whenever he reflected on that evil time. His silence regarding it was a very natural reserve.

In middle age we find Dickens saying about

his father, that the longer he lived, the better man he thought him. To us the elder Dickens is inevitably Mr. Micawber, and who shall say that he has no affection for that type of genial impecuniosity? To his father, no doubt, the novelist owed the happy temperament which had so large a part in his success; plainly, he owed little more. Of his mother, only one significant fact is recorded: that when at length an opportunity offered for the boy's escape from his drudgery in the blacking warehouse, Mrs. Dickens strongly objected to any such change. An unpleasant topic; enough to recognize in passing, that this incident certainly was not without its permanent effect on the son's mind.

The two years of childish hardship in London (1822–1824), which have resulted in one of the most picturesque and pathetic chapters that English literature can show, were of supreme importance in the growth of the novelist. Recollections of that time supplied him with a store of literary material upon which he drew through all the years of his best activity. In the only possible way he learnt the life of obscure London: himself a part of it, struggling and suffering in its sordid welter, at an age when the strongest impressions are received. It did not last long enough to corrupt the natural sweetness of his mind. Imagine Charles Dickens kept in the blacking warehouse for ten years; picture

him striving vainly to find utterance for the thoughts that were in him, refused the society of any but boors and rascals, making, perhaps, a futile attempt to succeed as an actor, and in full manhood measuring the abyss which sundered him from all he had hoped; it is only too easy, knowing the character of the man so well, to conceive what would have resulted. But at twelve years old he was sent to school, and from that day never lost a step on the path of worldly success. In spite of all, he was one of fortune's favourites; what he had undergone turned to his ultimate advantage, and the man who at twenty-four found himself the most popular author of his time and country, might well be encouraged to see things on the cheery side and to laugh with his multitudinous public.

Dickens's biographer makes a fanciful suggestion that the fact of his having observed low life at so tender an age (from ten to twelve) accounts for the purity of tone with which that life is treated in the novelist's works. In its proper place I shall take a different view of Dickens's method in this matter; it is not to be supposed for a moment that the boy, familiar with London on its grimiest side, working in cellars, inhabiting garrets, eating in cookshops, visiting a debtor's prison (his father was in detention for a time), escaped the contamination of his surroundings. London in all its foulness

was stamped on the lad's memory. He escaped in time, that was all, and his fortunate endowment did the rest.

The year 1825, then, saw him at a day-school in North London: the ordinary day-school of that time, which is as much as to say that it was just better than no school at all. One cannot discover that he learnt anything there, or from any professed teacher elsewhere, beyond the very elements of common knowledge. And here again is a point on which throughout his life Dickens felt a certain soreness; he wished to be thought, wished to be, a well-educated man, yet was well aware that in several directions he could never make up for early defects of training. In those days it was socially more important than now to have received a "classical education", and with the classics he had no acquaintance. There is no mistaking the personal note in those passages of his books which treat of, or allude to, Greek and Latin studies in a satirical spirit. True, it is just as impossible to deny that, in this particular field of English life, every sort of insincerity was rampant. Carlyle (who, by the by, was no Grecian) threw scorn upon "gerund-grinding", and with justice; Dickens delighted in showing classical teachers as dreary humbugs, and in hinting that they were such by the mere necessity of the case. Mr. Feeder, B.A., grinds, with his Greek or Latin stop on, for the edifica-

tion of Toots. Dr. Blimber snuffles at dinner-time, "It is remarkable that the Romans—", and every terrified boy assumes an air of impossible interest. Even Copperfield's worthy friend, Dr. Strong, potters in an imbecile fashion over a Greek lexicon which there is plainly not the slightest hope of his ever completing. Numerous are the side-hits at this educational idol of wealthy England. For all that, remember David's self-congratulation when, his school-days at an end, he feels that he is "well-taught"; in other words, that he is possessed of the results of Dr. Strong's mooning over dead languages. Dickens had far too much sense and honesty to proclaim a loud contempt where he knew himself ignorant. For an example of the sort of thing impossible to him, see the passage in an early volume of the Goncourts' Diary, where the egregious brothers report a quarrel with Saint-Victor, a defender of the Ancients; they, in their monumental fatuity, ending the debate by a declaration that a French novel called *Adolphe* was from every point of view preferable to Homer. Dickens knew better than this; but, having real ground for satire in the educational follies of the day, he indulged that personal pique which I have already touched upon, and doubtless reflected that he, at all events, had not greatly missed the help of the old heathens in his battle of life. When his own boys had passed through the approved curriculum of Public

School and University, he viewed the question more liberally. One of the most pleasing characters in his later work, Mr. Crisparkle in *Edwin Drood*, is a classical tutor, and without shadow of humbug; indeed, he is perhaps the only figure in all Dickens presenting a fair resemblance to the modern type of English gentleman.

There is no use in discussing what a man might have done had he been in important respects another man than he was. That his lack of education meant a serious personal defect in Dickens appears only too plainly throughout the story of his life; that it shows from time to time as a disadvantage in his books there is no denying. I am not concerned with criticism such as Macaulay's attack upon *Hard Times*, on the ground that it showed a hopeless misconception of the problems and methods of Political Economy; it seems to me that Dickens here produced a book of small merit, but this wholly apart from the question of its economic teaching. One feels, however, that the faults of such a book as *Hard Times* must, in some degree, be attributed to Dickens's lack of acquaintance with various kinds of literature, with various modes of thought. The theme, undoubtedly, is admirable, but the manner of its presentment betrays an extraordinary *naïveté*, plainly due to untrained intellect, a mind insufficiently stored. His work offers several such instances. And whilst on this point, it is as

well to remember that Dickens's contemporaries did not join unanimously in the chorus of delighted praise which greeted each new book; now and then he met with severe criticism from the graver literary organs, and in most cases such censure directed itself against precisely this weakness. It was held that Dickens set himself to treat of questions beyond his scope, and made known his views with an acrimony altogether unjustified in one who had only prejudice, or, at best, humane sentiment, to go upon. Some of his letters prove how keenly he felt this kind of criticism, which of course had no effect but to confirm him in his own judgments and habits of utterance. In truth, though there were numbers of persons who could point out Dickens's shortcomings as a thinker, only one man could produce literature such as his, enriching a great part of the human race with inestimable gifts of joy and kindness. He went his way in spite of critics, and did the work appointed him.

Of the results of his neglected boyhood as they appear in the details of his life, something will be said hereafter. It would have been wonderful if from such beginnings there had developed, by its own force, a well-balanced character. In balance, in moderation, Dickens was at times conspicuously lacking, whether as man or artist. Something more of education, even in the common sense of the word, would

assuredly have helped to subdue this fault in one so largely endowed with the genial virtues. He need not have lost his originality of mind. We can well enough conceive Charles Dickens ripening to the degree of wisdom which would have assured him a more quietly happy, and therefore a longer, life. But to that end other masters are needed than such as pretended to, and such as really did, instruct the unregarded son of the navy pay-officer.

If one asks (as well one may) how it came to pass that an uneducated man produced at the age of three-and-twenty a book so original in subject and treatment, so wonderfully true in observation, and on the whole so well written as *Sketches by Boz*, there is of course but one answer: the man had genius. But even genius is not independent of external aid. "Pray, sir," asked someone of the elder Dickens, "where was your son educated?" And the parent replied, "Why, indeed, sir,—ha! ha!—he may be said to have educated himself!" How early this self-instruction began we have already had a hint in that glimpse of the child sitting by Rochester Castle "with a head full of Partridge, Strap, Tom Pipes and Sancho Panza". Sancho Panza, it may perhaps be presumed, is known even to the present generation; but who were those others? Indeed, who knows anything nowadays of the great writers who nourished the young mind of Dickens?

Smollett, Fielding—perhaps, after all, it is as well that these authors do not supply the amusement of our young people. When eight or nine years old, Charles Dickens read them rapturously, all but got them by heart, and he asserts, what may be readily believed, that they did him no jot of harm. But these old novelists are strong food: a boy who is to enrich the literature of the world may well be nourished upon them; other boys, perchance, had better grow up on milder nutriment.

The catalogue of his early reading is most important; let it be given here, as Dickens gives it in *David Copperfield*, with additions elsewhere supplied. *Roderick Random*, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Humphrey Clinker*, *Tom Jones*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Don Quixote*, *Gil Blas*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Arabian Nights*, and *Tales of the Genii*; also volumes of Essayists: *The Tatler*, *The Spectator*, *The Idler*, *The Citizen of the World*, and a *Collection of Farces* edited by Mrs. Inchbald. These the child had found in his father's house at Chatham; he carried them with him in his head to London, and there found them his solace through the two years of bitter bondage. The importance of this list lies not merely in the fact that it certifies Dickens's earliest reading; it remained throughout his whole life (with very few exceptions) the sum of books dear to his memory and to his imagina-

tion. Those which he read first were practically the only books which influenced Dickens as an author. We must add the Bible (with special emphasis, the New Testament), Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and Sterne; among his own contemporaries, Scott and Carlyle. Therewith we may close this tale of authors whom he notably followed through his youth of study and his career as man of letters. After success came to him (and it came so early) he never had much time for reading, and probably never any great inclination. We are told that he especially enjoyed books of travel, but they served merely as recreation. His own travels in Europe supplied him with no new authors (one hears of his trying to read some French novelist, and finding the dialogue intolerably dull), nor with any new mental pursuit. He learned to speak in French and Italian, but made very little use of the attainment. Few really great men can have had so narrow an intellectual scope. Turn to his *practical* interests, and there indeed we have another picture; I speak at present only of the book-lore which shaped his mind, and helped to direct his pen.

To this early familiarity with English classics is due the remarkable command of language shown even in his first sketches. When I come to speak of Dickens's style, it will be time enough to touch upon faults which are obvious; vulgar-

isms occur in his apprentice work, but the wonder is that they were not more frequent; assuredly they must have been, but for the literary part of that self-education which good fortune had permitted him. A thorough acquaintance with the books above mentioned made him master of that racy tongue which was demanded by his subject, and by his way of regarding it. Destined to a place in the list of writers characteristically English, he found in the works of his predecessors a natural inheritance, and without need of studious reflection came equipped to his task.

No, they are not read nowadays, the old masters of the English novel; yet they must needs be read by anyone who would understand the English people. To the boy Dickens, they presented pictures of life as it was still going on about him; not much had altered; when he himself began to write fiction, his scenes, his characters, made a natural continuance of the stories told by Smollett, Fielding, Sterne, and Goldsmith. To us, at the beginning of the twentieth century, *Nicholas Nickleby* tells of a social life as far away as that described in *Roderick Random*; yet in another respect these books are nearer to us, of more familiar spirit, than the novel—whatever it may be—newest from the press and in greatest vogue. They are a part of our nationality; in both of them runs our very

life-blood. However great the changes on the surface of life, England remains, and is likely to remain, the same at heart with the England of our eighteenth-century novelists. By communing with them, one breaks through the disguises of modern fashion, gauges the importance of "progress", and learns to recognize the historically essential. Before the end of this essay, I shall have often insisted on the value of Dickens's work as an expression of national life and sentiment. Born, of course, with the aptitude for such utterance, he could not have had better schooling than in the lumber-room library at Chatham. There he first heard the voice of his own thoughts. And to those books we also must turn, if the fury of to-day's existence leave us any inclination or leisure for a study of the conditions which produced Charles Dickens.

His choice of a pseudonym for the title-page of his *Sketches* is significant, for, as he tells us himself, "Boz" was simply a facetious nasal contraction, used in his family, of a nickname "Moses", the original Moses being no other than the son of Dr. Primrose in the *Vicar of Wakefield*. There is a peculiar happiness in this close link between Goldsmith and Dickens, spirits so much akin in tender humanity. Indeed, Dickens had a special affection for the *Vicar of Wakefield*. When thinking of his first Christmas book (and who could more have delighted in the *Carol* than

Oliver Goldsmith?), he says that he wishes to write a story of about the same length as *The Vicar*. One could easily draw a parallel between the two authors; and it is certain that among the influences which made Dickens, none had more importance than the example of Goldsmith's fiction.

A word is called for by the two books, among those mentioned above, which are least connected with English traditions and English thought. The *Arabian Nights* and *Tales of the Genii* were certainly more read in Dickens's day than in ours; probably most children at present would know nothing of Eastern romance but for the Christmas pantomime. Oddly enough, Dickens seems to make more allusions throughout his work to the *Arabian Nights* than to any other book or author. He is not given to quoting, or making literary references; but those fairy tales of the East supply him with a good number of illustrations, and not only in his early novels. Is it merely fanciful to see in this interest, not of course an explanation, but a circumstance illustrative, of that habit of mind which led him to discover infinite romance in the obscurer life of London? Where the ordinary man sees nothing but everyday habit, Dickens is filled with the perception of marvellous possibilities. Again and again he has put the spirit of the *Arabian Nights* into his pictures of life by the river Thames.

Some person annoyed him once by speaking of his books as "romances", and his annoyance is quite intelligible, for a "romance" in the proper sense of the word he never wrote; yet the turn of his mind was very different from that exhibited by a modern pursuer of veracity in fiction. He sought for wonders amid the dreary life of common streets; and perhaps in this direction also his intellect was encouraged when he made acquaintance with the dazzling Eastern fables, and took them alternately with that more solid nutriment of the eighteenth-century novel.

The Essayists must have done much for the refining of his intelligence; probably his reading of Addison and Steele came nearer to education, specially understood, than anything else with which he was occupied in boyhood. Long afterwards, when he had thought of a periodical publication (which was to become *Household Words*), he wrote about it to Forster: "I strongly incline to the notion of a kind of *Spectator* (Addison's)—very cheap and pretty frequent". How strange it sounds to our ears! What editor would nowadays dream of taking Addison as his model? But Dickens was so much nearer to the age of graceful leisure, and, on one side of his personality, had profited so well by its teaching.

Of Sir Walter Scott he does not seem often to have spoken, though there is evidence in one of his American speeches that he truly admired that

greater spirit. And it seems to me that Scott's influence is not to be mistaken in the narrative of *Barnaby Rudge*.

One artist there was, an artist with the brush and burin, of whom it may be said that Dickens assuredly learnt, though I cannot see a possibility of comparing their work, as Forster and others have done. The genius of Hogarth differed widely from that of the author of *Pickwick*, but it was inevitable that his profound studies of life and character should attract, even fascinate, a mind absorbed in contemplation of poverty and all its concomitants. Added thereto was the peculiar interest in the artist's name, which resulted to Dickens from his marriage at the age of twenty-four with Miss Hogarth, this lady claiming descent from her great namesake. Both men were strenuous moralists, but it would be hard to show any other point of resemblance in their methods of presenting fact. As to their humour, I am unable to find anything in Hogarth which can for a moment be compared with that quality in Dickens. Hogarth smiles, it is true, but how grimly! There prevails in him an uncompromising spirit of which the novelist had nothing whatever. Try to imagine a volume of fiction produced by the artist of *Gin Lane*, of *The Harlot's Progress*, and put it beside the books which, from *Pickwick* onwards, have been the delight of English homes. Puritans both of

them, Hogarth shows his religion on the sterner side; Dickens, in a gentle avoidance of whatsoever may give offence to the pure in heart, the very essence of his artistic conscience being that compromise which the other scorned. In truth, as artists they saw differently. Dickens was no self-deceiver; at any moment his steps would guide him to parts of London where he could behold, and had often beheld, scenes as terrible as any that the artist struck into black and white; he looked steadily at such things, and, at the proper time, could speak of them. But when he took up the pen of the story-teller, his genius constrained him to such use, such interpretation, of bitter fact as made him beloved, not dreaded, by readers asking, before all else, to be soothingly entertained. On this point I shall have more to say presently. Enough here, that the great limner undoubtedly helped to concentrate the young writer's mind on subjects he was to treat in his own way. Evidence, were it needed, is found in the preface to *Oliver Twist*, where, after speaking of the romantic types of rascality then popular in fiction, he declares that only in one book has he seen the true thief depicted, namely, in the works of Hogarth.

With one artist of his own time Dickens was brought into close relations. The *Sketches* were illustrated by George Cruikshank; so was *Oliver Twist*, and a foolish bit of gossip, troublesome at

the time, would have it that Oliver's history had come into being at the suggestion of certain drawings of Cruikshank's own. For my own part, I can enjoy only a few of the famous etchings in these early books; it appears to me that a man of less originality than Cruikshank's, the late Fred Barnard, has done better work in his pictures to the novels, better in the sense of more truly illustrative. But in their leaning to the grotesque, Dickens and Cruikshank were so much alike that one can at all events understand the baseless story which Dickens took all possible trouble to refute. Some years afterwards, when Cruikshank published his picture called *The Bottle*, intended as a blow in the cause of temperance, Dickens spoke and wrote of it with high admiration, though he had fault to find with the manner in which its lesson was conveyed. There could not but exist much sympathy between these workers on lines so similar in different arts; but beyond the fact of Dickens's liking for the artist's designs from the beginning of his own career, nothing, so far as I know, can be advanced in proof of his having been guided or prompted by Cruikshank's genius.

It was in imitation of his father's example that Dickens, by learning shorthand, prepared himself to become, first a reporter in one of the offices in Doctors'-Commons (the remarkable region so well known from *David Copperfield*), and after that in the gallery of the House. Thus far had he got

at nineteen. With the vivacious energy which was always his leading characteristic, he made himself, forthwith, a journalist of mark in the sphere to which he was restricted. Prior to this, whilst earning his livelihood as a clerk in an attorney's office, he had somehow read a good deal at the British Museum, and had devoted most of his evenings to the theatre. It may safely be said that the evening amusement was much more important in its results than any formal study he undertook; unless, indeed,—a not improbable conjecture—he, like Charles Lamb, sought the reading-room of the Museum chiefly for dramatic literature. At this time of his life, Dickens had resolved upon a theatrical career; whether as dramatist or actor he did not much mind, feeling equal to either pursuit. His day's drudgery, however thoroughly performed, was endured only in the hope of release as soon as he found his chance upon the stage. Of course he would have succeeded in either capacity, though with a success far less brilliant than fate had in store for him. He did in the end become, if not strictly an actor, at all events a public entertainer whose strongest effects were produced by the exercise of melodramatic talent; as an amateur, he acted frequently throughout his life. His attempts at dramatic authorship—*The Strange Gentleman*, a farce played in 1836; *The Village Coquettes*, a libretto, produced in the same year;

and *The Lamplighter*, a farce written in 1838, but never acted—gave no serious proof of his powers in this direction; they were hurriedly thrown off at the time when his literary fame was already beginning. But in the year or two before he wrote his *Sketches*, when the consciousness of vague ability and high ambition made him restive in his mechanical calling of shorthand writer, he applied to the manager of Covent Garden Theatre for an opportunity of showing what he could do. The accident of illness interfered with an appointment granted him, and, owing to advance in journalism, the application was not renewed. Plainly Dickens came very near indeed to entering upon the actor's life, and so close throughout is his connection with the theatrical world, that one cannot glance at this incident as a mere detail in the story of his youth. It declares a natural bent of mind, not the passing inclination which is so often felt by lads more or less gifted.

When, in the full enjoyment of his power, Dickens amused himself and served charitable ends by getting up dramatic performances, we note a significance in his selection of a play. He chose Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*, himself taking the part of Bobadil. How early he read Ben Jonson, I am unable to say; I should like to be assured that it was in those hours spent at the British Museum, when all his work yet lay before him. One can well imagine

the delight of Dickens in a first acquaintance with rare Ben. Forster gives an excellent description of the zeal and gusto with which his friend entered into the character of Bobadil; how for some weeks he actually *became* Bobadil, talking him and writing him on every opportunity. What more natural than his enjoyment of the sterling old writer whose strength lay in the exhibition of extravagant humours! Dickens had no such life about him as the Elizabethan; in comparison, his world was starved and squalid; but of the humours of the men he knew—*humours* precisely in Jonson's sense—he made richer use than anything in that kind known to English literature since the golden age. All Dickens might be summed in the title of Jonson's play; no figure but is representative of a "humour", running at times into excesses hardly surpassed by Ben himself. On several occasions (1845–50) he acted in this comedy, and one can hardly doubt that it helped to confirm his tendency to exuberance of grotesque characterization.

So much, then, for that part of his self-education which came from books. Meanwhile life had been supplying him with abundant experience, which no one knew better than Dickens how to store and utilize. Théophile Gautier, an observer of a very different type, says somewhere of himself: "*Toute ma valeur, c'est que je suis un homme pour qui le monde visible existe*"; in

Dickens this was far from the sole, or the supreme, quality; but assuredly few men have known so well how to use their eyes. A student is commonly inobservant of outward things; Dickens, far from a bookish youth, looked about him in those years of struggle for a livelihood with a glance which missed no minutest feature of what he saw. We are told that his eyes were very bright, impressing all who met him with a sense of their keenness. Keen they were in no ordinary sense; for they pierced beneath the surface, and (in Lamb's phrase) discerned the *quiddity* of common objects. Everything he looked upon was registered in his mind, where at any moment he could revive the original impression, and with his command of words, vital, picturesque, show the thing to others.

His work as attorney's clerk lasted for not quite two years (1827–28); his reportership in the courts of Doctors'-Commons seems to have been of even shorter duration; but in this time he probably acquired most of his knowledge of the legal world, which was shown first of all in *Pickwick*, and continued to appear, in one form or another, throughout his books. For exactitude of observation, this group of professional figures, from office-boy up to judge, is the most valuable thing in Dickens. It strikes one as noteworthy, on the other hand, that he never cared to use his experience of journalism. Practically, he once at-

tempted to resume his connection with the press, and became editor of *The Daily News*—for not quite three weeks (1846); but the novels (unless we take account of the caricatures in *Pickwick*) have no concern with that side of literary life. Within limits the picture is supplied by Thackeray. But Dickens might have put to wonderful service his memories of the time when he reported for the *True Sun*, the *Mirror of Parliament*, and the *Morning Chronicle* (1831–36). He told the story, long afterwards, in one of the best and brightest of his speeches, that given at the dinner of the Newspaper Press Fund in 1865; when, speaking to a generation which travelled by steam, he recalled how he had been upset in almost every description of vehicle known in this country, and had carried reports to his editor in the teeth of difficulties insuperable by any man of merely common energy and resource. What use he made of his experiences in travel by highway and byway, we know well, for these are among his characteristic pages. Never is Dickens more joyously himself than when he tells of stage-coach and posting-vehicles. He tried his hand at a description of the railway, but with no such gusto, no such success. His youth belonged to the pre-locomotive time, the time of jolly faring on English roads—jolly in spite of frost and rain, and discomforts innumerable. All this he has made his own, and he learned it as a newspaper reporter.

For the acquiring of knowledge of his own country he could hardly have been better placed. Hither and thither he sped, north and south, east and west, to report the weighty words of orators now long forgotten. He saw most English towns; he marked with pleasure the hamlets and villages; of inns, great and small, he learnt all that man is capable of learning. And in that old England, there was more of the picturesque, more of the beautiful, than we see to-day. I have insisted upon the ugliness of the life of that time; indeed, it can hardly be exaggerated; but there is another aspect of Dickens's England, one which might be illustrated with ample detail from all his better books. Side by side with the increase of comfort (or of luxury), with that lightening of dark places which is surely good, goes on the destruction of so much one would fain preserve. Think, for instance, of Yarmouth, as seen in *David Copperfield*, and the Yarmouth of this year's railway advertisements. What more need be said!

Not only, then, in London, but through the length and breadth of the land, Dickens was seeing and studying his countrymen. Nothing that he learnt embittered him, any more than had his own hardships in the years happily gone by; but he noted many a form of suffering, with the tyranny, great or small, the hypocrisy and the thickheadedness which were responsible for it; and when his time came, he knew how to com-

mend these things to the sympathy, the indignation, the mirth of larger audiences than any author had yet controlled. Overflowing with the enjoyment of life, he naturally found more sunshine than gloom, whether in crowded streets, or by the wayside with its scattered wanderers. Now, as always, he delighted in the amusements of the people, in fairs and shows, and every sort of humble entertainment. A conjurer, a fortune-teller, a shabby acrobat, a cheap-Jack—one and all were irresistible to him; he could not pass a menagerie, a circus, a strolling troop of players; the squeak of Punch had as much charm for him as for any child. Merely to mention such folk is to call up a host of reminiscences from the books which bear his name. He had not the vagabond nature which we see, for instance, in George Borrow; he is a man of the town, of civilization; but the forms of vagabondage which arise amid a great population, quaint survivals, ragged eccentricites, laughter-moving incarnations of rascality and humbug, excited his unfailing interest. He lived to take his place in a society of wealth, culture, and refinement; but his heart was always with the people, with the humble-minded and those of low estate. Among these he had found the material for his genius to work upon, and, most important of all, among these he learnt to make himself the perfect mouthpiece of English homeliness.

In *Oliver Twist* we come upon a casual mention, quite serious, of "continental frivolities". The phrase is delightfully English, and very characteristic of Dickens's mind when he began to write. Ten years later he would not have used it; he outgrew that narrowness; but it was well that he knew no better at five-and-twenty. Insularity in his growing time was needful to him, and must be counted for a virtue.

A year before Queen Victoria's accession, appeared, in two volumes, *Sketches by Boz, illustrative of Everyday Life and Everyday People*, a collection of papers which had already seen the light in periodicals. This book came from a 'prentice hand, but it contains in germ all the future Dickens. Glance at the headings of the pages; here we have the Beadle and all connected with him, London streets, theatres, shows, the pawnshop, Doctors'-Commons, Christmas, Newgate, coaching, the River; here we have a satirical picture of Parliament, fun made of cheap snobbery, a rap on the knuckles of sectarianism. Hardly a topic associated with Dickens in his maturity is missing from the earliest attempts. What could be more prophetic than the title of the opening chapters—*Our Parish*? With the Parish — a large one, indeed — Dickens to the end concerned himself; therein lay his force, his secret of vitality. He began with a rapid survey of his whole field; hinting at all he might

accomplish, indicating the limits he was not to pass.

He treats at once of the lower middle class, where he will be always at his best; with the class below it, with those who literally earn bread in the sweat of their brows, he was better acquainted than any other novelist of his time, but they figure much less prominently in his books. To the lower middle class, a social status so peculiarly English, so rich in virtues yet so provocative of satire, he by origin belonged; in its atmosphere he always breathed most freely, and had the largest command of his humorous resources. Humour is a characteristic of *Boz*, but humour undeveloped, tentative; merely a far-off promise of the fruit which ripened so rapidly. There is joking about the results of matrimony, a primitive form of facetiousness which belongs to the time and the class, and which it took Dickens a good many years to shake off. Vulgarity was, of course, inseparable from his subject, and that the young author should have been himself involved in the charge is easily understood. A vulgar expression may be here and there discovered (I mean, of course, in the author's own words), but the tone of the whole work is as far from vulgarity as that of the eighteenth-century sketches and meditations of which we are occasionally reminded. As for the form, it strikes one as more original than that of the subsequent

books. No one, indeed, had ever made such use as this of materials taken from the very dust-heap of decent London life; such common paltry stuff of the town, yet here so truthfully described, with such intimate touches, such glimpses of mirthful motive, as come only from the hand of the born artist. Veracity I take to be the high merit of these sketches. Dickens has not yet developed his liking for the grotesquely original; he pictures the commonplace, with no striving for effect, and admirably succeeds. Some of these descriptions of the town in its various aspects, day and night, he never surpassed; they abound in detail, yet never by any chance admit a false note. His persons live and move; you may encounter nearly all of them to-day, affected by the course of time, but still recognizable from his fine portraiture. It was no slight achievement for a youth of four-and-twenty, this putting on record once for all of so large and significant a portion of English life.

Therewith ended Dickens's apprenticeship. He had stored his material, was on the point of attaining full command of his powers. When next he sat down to write he produced a masterpiece.

CHAPTER III

THE STORY-TELLER

A glance over the literary annals of the time during which Dickens was apprentice to his craft shows us, in fiction, the names of Disraeli, Peacock, Mrs. Norton, Bulwer, Ainsworth, and Marryat. One and all signify little to the coming master, though he professed a high esteem for the romances of Lord Lytton, and with Captain Marryat shared the tradition of the eighteenth-century novelists. Tennyson had already come forth; Browning had printed a poem; *Sartor Resartus* had "got itself published", and was waiting for readers. In another sphere, *Tracts for the Times* were making commotion; regarding which matter the young student of life doubtless had already his opinion. It is of more interest to note that in 1832 were established *Chambers's Journal* and *Knight's Penny Magazine*; indicative of the growth of a new public, a class of readers which no author had hitherto directly addressed, and which was only to be reached by publication in the cheapest form. From the preface to *Oliver Twist* we learn that romances of highwaymen had much vogue, of course among the populace, and about this time Ainsworth responded to the

demand with his *Jack Sheppard*. Against this prevalent glorification of rascality Dickens directed his first novel, properly so called.

Pickwick cannot be classed as a novel; it is merely a great book. Everyone knows that it originated in the suggestion of a publisher that the author of *Sketches by Boz* should write certain facetious chapters to accompany certain facetious drawings; it was to be a joke at the expense of Cockney sportsmen. Dickens obtained permission to write in his own way. Of the original suggestion there remains Mr. Winkle with the gun; for the rest, this bit of hackwork became a good deal more than the writer himself foresaw. Obviously he sat down with only the vaguest scheme; even the personality of his central figure was not clear to him. A pardonable fault, when the circumstances are known, but the same defect appears in all Dickens's earlier books; he only succeeded in correcting it when his imaginative fervour had begun to cool, and in the end he sought by the artifices of an elaborate plot to make up for the decline of qualities greatly more important. In considering Dickens as an artist, I propose first of all to deal with the construction of his stories. Let it be understood that in the present chapter I discuss the novels solely from this point of view, postponing consideration of those features of the master's work which are his strength and his glory.

However ill-constructed, *Pickwick*, I imagine, was never found uninteresting. One may discourse about it in good set terms, pointing out that it belongs to a very old school of narrative, and indicating resemblances with no less a work than *Don Quixote*—Mr. Pickwick and Sam Weller being in some degree the antitypes of the Knight of La Mancha and Sancho. Intrigue there is none (save in the offices of Messrs. Dodson and Fogg). The thing is aimed at the reader's diaphragm, and, by ricochet, touches his heart. Lord Campbell declared that he would rather have written *Pickwick* than be Chief Justice of England; yet here we have simply the rambles and accidents and undignified escapades of certain Londoners, one of them accompanied by a man-servant, whom he picked up as boots at an inn; we have a typical London landlady, a breach-of-promise case, and a debtors' prison. What unpromising material, in the year 1837, for any author but the one who knew how to make immortal use of it!

As in the *Sketches* we found the germ of all Dickens, so in this second book, not yet a novel, may we mark tendencies soon to have full development. The theme itself admitting no great variety of tone, we have the time-honoured device of episodic stories; one of them shows that melodramatic bent which was to be of such importance in future books; another, the tale of Gabriel Grub,

gives, thus early, a hint of the Christmas fantasies which so greatly strengthened their author's hold on the popular admiration and love. The close gives us our first example of Dickens's resolute optimism. Everybody (or all but everybody) is to be made happy for ever after; knavish hearts are softened by gratitude, and those of the good beat high in satisfied benevolence. This is the kind of thing that delights the public, and lucky would be the public if it were often offered to them with a rich sincerity like that of Dickens.

With *Oliver Twist* we take up the tradition of English novel-writing; at once we are reminded of the old books in the library at Chatham. Scenes and people and tone are new, but the manner is that long ago established. As for construction, there is a little, and a very little, more of it than in *Pickwick*; it is badly managed, so badly, that one seeks to explain the defect by remembering that the early part of *Oliver* and the last part of *Pickwick* were in hand simultaneously. Yet not in this book alone did Dickens give proof of an astonishing lack of skill when it came to inventing plausible circumstances. Later, by sheer force of resolve, he exhibited ingenuity enough, often too much for his purpose; but the art of adapting simple probabilities to the ends of a narrative he never mastered. In his plots, unfortunately, he is seldom concerned with the plain motives of human life. (Observe that I am speaking of his

plots.) Too often he prefers some far-fetched eccentricity, some piece of knavishness, some unlikely occurrence, about which to weave his tale. And this, it seems to me, is directly traceable to his fondness for the theatre. He planned a narrative as though plotting for the stage. When the necessities of intrigue did not weigh upon him — as happily was so often the case in his roomy stories—he could forget the footlights; at the first demand for an "effect", gas and limelight are both turned on. Cannot we often hear the incidental music? Dickens's love for the stage was assuredly a misfortune to him, as author and as man.

In the idle mysteries which are made to surround Oliver, and in the incredible weakness of what is meant to be the darkest part of the story, we have pure stage-work. Chapter XVII contains a passage ridiculing the melodrama of the time, a tissue of mediæval villanies; what Dickens himself did, in these worst moments of his invention, was to use the motives of standard melodrama on a contemporary subject. Even the dialogue occasionally proves this. "Wolves tear your throats!" growls Bill Sikes, fleeing from his pursuers—a strange exclamation for a London burglar. And again, when brought to bay after the murder he calls one of the horrified thieves "this screeching Hell-Babe"—phrase natural enough on the boards of the Adelphi Theatre,

but incongruous in a London slum. That part of the book in which Rose Maylie and her lover appear smacks rather of the circulating library than of the stage. We read of Rose in distress that "a heavy wildness came over her soft blue eyes". I cannot remember that Dickens was ever again guilty of such a phrase as this; but the theatric vice appears in his construction to the end.

In the years 1838 and 1839 he did far too much. *Nicholas Nickleby* was begun long before the end of *Oliver Twist*, as *Oliver* was begun before the end of *Pickwick*. Ill-considered engagements so pressed upon him that in February, 1839, we find him appealing to his publisher for patience, and expressing an opinion that "the conduct of three different stories at the same time, and the production of a large portion of each every month, would have been beyond Scott himself". It came as a natural result of his sudden and great success. Finally, he put himself at ease by a simple refusal to be bound by his undertakings; an extreme step, but one which has to be balanced against the interested calculations of a shrewd publisher.

It is plain that *Nickleby* suffered from these circumstances of undue stress; in spite of its popularity, and of merits presently to be recognized, it is the least satisfactory of the group of books written before Dickens's first visit to

America. Five books in five years, from *Pickwick* in 1837 to *Barnaby Rudge* in 1841—a record nothing like that of Scott, but wonderful as the work of a man with only half Scott's length of experience to draw upon. *Nicholas* being much longer than its predecessor, the faulty construction is more felt, and becomes a weariness, an irritation; that is to say, if one thinks of the matter at all, which one never should in reading Dickens. Again we are involved in melodrama of the feeblest description; towards the end of the story there are wastes of stagey dialogue and action, unreadable by any but the very young. All this is quite unworthy of the author; but, following upon *Oliver*, it indicated the limits of his power as a novelist. Dickens never had command of "situation", though he was strong in incident. A great situation must be led up to by careful and skilful foresight in character and event—precisely where his resources always failed him. Thus, scenes which he intended, and perhaps thought, to be very effective, fall flat through their lack of substance. A mature reader turns away in disgust, and, if he belong to a hasty school of modern criticism, henceforth declares that Dickens is hopelessly antiquated, and was always vastly overpraised.

Here, for the last time, we have episodic stories; admissible enough in a book which, for all its faults, smacks so of the leisurely old fiction,

In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, which came next, there is more originality of design: one does not smell the footlights, but has, instead, delicious wafts of freshness from the fields and lanes of England. Of course we find an initial vice of construction, inseparable from Dickens's habit at that time of beginning to write without any settled scheme. Master Humphrey opens with talk of himself, enters upon a relation of something that befell him in his wanderings, and of a sudden—the author perceiving this necessity — vanishes from the scene, which is thenceforth occupied by the figures he has served to introduce. In other words, readers of the periodical called *Master Humphrey's Clock* having shown some impatience with its desultory character, Dickens converted into a formal novel the bit of writing which he had begun as sketch or gossip. Nowadays it would be all but impossible for a writer of fiction, who by any accident should have written and published serially a work with such a fault of design, to republish it in a volume without correcting the faulty part; a very slight degree of literary conscientiousness, as we understand it, would impose this duty; nay, fear of the public would exact it. But such a thing never occurred to Dickens. Conscientious he was in matters of his art, as we shall have occasion to notice, but the art itself was less exacting in his day; a multitude applauded, and why should he meddle

with what they had so loudly approved? In the same way we find Walter Scott coming one fine day upon an old manuscript of his own—two or three chapters of a romance long ago begun and thrown aside. He reads the pages, smiles over them, and sits down to complete the story. In reading the proofs of *Waverley*, if not before, Scott must have been well aware of the great gap between its two portions, of the difference of style, the contrast of tone: the early chapters so obviously an experiment, the latter mature and masterly. It would have taken him a very few hours to rewrite the beginning; but why? The whole thing was done for his amusement. The public, in its turn, was something more than amused. And our grave Art of Fiction, a stern task-mistress, had nothing to do with the matter.

For the rest, *The Old Curiosity Shop* is greatly superior from this point of view to the previous novels. The story has more of symmetry; it moves more regularly to its close, and that close is much more satisfying; it remains in one's mind as a whole, with no part that one feels obtrusive or incongruous or wearily feeble. In writing the last portion, Dickens was so engrossed by his theme that he worked at unusual hours, prolonging the day's labour into the night—never, of course, a habit with a man of his social instincts. The book gained thereby its unity of

effect. It is a story in the true sense, and one of the most delightful in our language.

Last of this early group—product of continuous effort through five of the happiest years that man ever lived—comes *Barnaby Rudge*, which is in part a story of private life, in part a historical novel. The two portions are not well knit together; the interest with which we begin is lost in far wider interests before we end; nevertheless Barnaby is free from Dickens's worst vices of construction. Granting the imperfection of the scheme, it is closely wrought, and its details are not ill-contrived. One defect forced upon our attention is characteristic of Dickens: his inability to make skilful revelation of circumstances which, for the purpose of the story, he has kept long concealed. This skill never came to him; with apology for so disrespectful a word, he must be held to have bungled all his effects of this kind, and there can be no doubt that the revealing of the mystery of *Edwin Drood* would have betrayed the old inability. Permit Dickens to show us the life he knew in its simple every-day course, and he is unsurpassed by any master of fiction; demand from him a contrived story, and he yields at once to the very rank and file of novelists.

A peculiarity of this book is the frequent opening of a chapter with several lines of old-fashioned moralizing, generally on the compen-

sations of life. Later, Dickens found a happy substitute for this kind of thing in his peculiar vein of good-humoured satire, which had a more practical if a narrower scope.

The year 1842 was a turning-point in his career. He paid his first visit to America, and came back with his ideas enlarged on many subjects. After publishing *American Notes*, and the first of his Christmas books, the *Carol*, he completed, in 1844, what is in some respects the greatest of his works, *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The fact that such a judgment is possible shows how little the characteristic merit of Dickens's writings has to do with their completeness as works of art; for a novel more shapeless, a story less coherent than *Martin Chuzzlewit*, will not easily be found in any literature. Repeated readings avail not to fix it in one's mind as a sequence of events; we know the persons, we remember many a scene, but beyond that all is a vague reminiscence. I repeat, that one can only feel astonishment at the inability of such a man as Dickens to scheme better than this. Had he but trusted to some lucid narrative, however slight! Misled by the footlights, he aims at a series of "effects", every one void of human interest, or, at best, an outrage upon probability. He involves himself in complications which necessitate leaps and bounds of perverse ingenuity. And at last, his story frankly hopeless, he cuts

through knots, throws difficulties into oblivion, and plays up his characters to a final rally; so sure of his touch upon the readers' emotions that he can disregard their bewilderment. The first chapter, a very dull, long-drawn piece of ridicule directed against the supposed advantages of "birth", has nothing whatever to do with the story; the book would gain by its omission. Dickens in a splenetic mood (a rare thing) is far from at his best. *Chuzzlewit* surpasses all his novels in the theatrical conventionality of its great closing scene—its grand finale (see Chapter LII). Around old Martin (at the centre of the stage) are grouped all the dramatis personæ, whether they have any business there or not; Mrs. Gamp, Poll Sweedlepipe, and young Bailey coming in without rhyme or reason, simply to complete the circle. It is magnificent: the brilliant triumph of stage tradition. But it does not suffice; something more is needed that the reader's appetite for a cheerful ending may have entire satisfaction; therefore, before the book closes, who should turn up in the heart of London but that very family of miserable emigrants whom Martin and Tapley had left behind them in the wild west of America! Here they are, at the foot of the Monument, close by Todgers'—arrived on purpose to shake hands with everyone, and to fill the cup of benevolent rejoicing. What man save Dickens ever dared so

much; what man will ever find the courage to strike that note again!

It is necessary to bear in mind that these novels appeared in monthly parts—twenty of them—and that the author began publishing with only three or four parts completed. Such a mode of writing accounts for many things. Dickens admitted certain disadvantages, but always held that this was the best way of pursuing his art. Of course the novel became an improvisation. In beginning *Chuzzlewit*, he had no intention whatever of sending his hero to America; the resolve was taken, suddenly, when a declining sale proved that the monthly instalments were not proving so attractive as usual. Impossible ever to make changes in the early chapters of a story, however urgently the artist's conscience demanded it; impossible, in Dickens's case, to see mentally as a whole the work on which he was engaged. What he had written, he had written; it had to serve its purpose. One can only lament that such were the defects of his inimitable qualities.

The next great book was not finished till 1848; meanwhile there had been travel and residence on the Continent—a bright chapter in Dickens's life, but without noteworthy influence on his work. His Italian sketches are characteristic of the man; one cannot say more. Among the Alps he wrote *Dombey and Son*, not without

trouble due to the unfamiliar surroundings. "You can hardly imagine", he declares to Forster, "what infinite pains I take, or what extraordinary difficulty I find in getting on *fast*. . . . I suppose this is partly the effect of two years' ease, and partly of the absence of the streets and numbers of figures. I can't express how much I want these. It seems as if they supplied something to my brain, which I cannot bear, when busy, to lose." In truth, away from London he was cut off from the source of his inspiration; but he had a memory stored with London pictures. He tells us, and we can well believe him, that, whilst writing, he saw every bed in the dormitory of Paul's school, every pew in the church where Florence was married. In which connection it is worth mentioning that not till the year 1855 did Dickens keep any sort of literary memorandum-book. After all his best work was done, he felt misgivings which prompted him to make notes. A French or English realist, with his library of documents, may muse over this fact—and deduce from it what he pleases.

Dombey is the first of the novels which have a distinct moral theme; its subject is Pride. Here there is no doubt that Dickens laid down the broad outlines of his story in advance, and adhered to them; we feel that the book is built up with great pains, with infinite endeavour to make a unity. The advance is undeniable (of

course we have lost something, for all that), but one cannot help noticing that with the death of Paul ends a novel which is complete in itself, a novel more effective, I think, than results from the prolonged work. Dickens tells, in letters, of the effort it cost him to transfer immediately all the interest of his story from the dead boy to his sister Florence; the necessity for it was unfortunate. As usual, we have loud melodrama side by side with comedy unsurpassed for its delicate touches of truth and fancy. The girl Alice and her disreputable mother, pendants to Edith Dombey and Mrs. Skewton, are in mid-limelight; perhaps Dickens never so boldly defied the modesty of nature as here, both in character and situation. An instance of far-fetched and cumbrous contrivance, with gross improbability added to it, is Mr. Dombey's discovery of the place to which his wife has fled. Nothing easier than to bring about the same end by simple and probable means; but Dickens had an "effect" in view—of the kind that so strangely satisfied him. His melodrama serves an end which is new in *Dombey*, though afterwards of frequent occurrence: that of bringing together, in strangely intimate relations, figures representing social extremes. Dickens came to delight in this. His best use of the motive is in *Bleak House*; and a striking instance occurs in the last pages he ever wrote.

It was whilst telling the story of little Paul, a victim of excessive parental care, that, perhaps by force of contrast, the novelist looked back upon his own childhood, and thought of turning it to literary use. We learn from Forster (Book i, chap. 2) that in the year 1847 was written a chapter of reminiscences which Dickens at first intended to be the beginning of an autobiography. Wisely, no doubt, he soon abandoned this idea; but the memory of his own sad childhood would not be dismissed, and it made the groundwork of his next novel (1850), *David Copperfield*. Dickens held this to be his best book, and the world has agreed with him. In no other does the narrative move on with such full sail from first to last. He wrote from his heart; picturing completely all he had suffered as a child, and even touching upon the domestic trouble of his later life. It is difficult to speak of *David Copperfield* in terms of cool criticism, but for the moment I am concerned only with its form, and must put aside the allurement of its matter. Once more, then, combined with lavish wealth of description, character, pathos, humour, we meet with poverty of invention, abuse of drama. All the story of Emily (after her childhood) is unhappily conceived. (Of course this part of the book was at once dramatized and acted.) Such a subject lay wholly beyond Dickens's scope, and could not be treated by him in any

but an unsatisfactory way. The mysteries surrounding Mr. Wickham, the knaveries of Uriah Heep, have no claim upon our belief; intrigue half-heartedly introduced merely because intrigue seems necessary; even Mr. Micawber, in all his robust reality, has to walk among these airy figments, and play his theatrical part. In the scene between Emily and Rosa Dartle (Chapter L) the orchestra plays very loudly indeed; every word has its accompanying squeak or tremolo. But enough: one has not the heart to dwell upon the shortcomings of such a book.

It may be noted, however, with what frankness Dickens accepts the conventionality of a story told in the first person. David relates in detail conversations which take place before he is born, and makes no apology for doing so. Why should he? The point never occurs to the engrossed reader. In *Bleak House*, where the same expedient is used (in part), such boldness is not shown, though the convention still demands abundant sacrifice of probability in another way. Finally, in *Great Expectations* we have a narrative in the first person, which, granting to the narrator nothing less than Dickens's own equipment of genius, preserves verisimilitude with remarkable care, nothing being related, as seen or heard, which could not have been seen or heard by the writer. This instance serves to show that Dickens did become conscious of

artistic faults, and set himself to correct them. But, in the meantime, he had touched the culmination of his imaginative life, and a slight improvement in technical correctness could not compensate the world's loss when his characteristic strength began to fail and his natural force to be abated.

Bleak House (1853) is constructed only too well. Here Dickens applied himself laboriously to the perfecting of that kind of story he had always had in view, and produced a fine example of theatrical plot. One cannot say, in this case, that the intrigue refuses to be remembered; it is a puzzle, yet ingeniously simple; the parts fitting together very neatly indeed. So neatly, that poor untidy Life disclaims all connection with these doings, however willingly she may recognize for her children a score or so of the actors. To be sure there are oversights. How could Dickens expect one to believe that Lady Dedlock recognized her lover's handwriting in a piece of work done by him *as law-writer*—she not even knowing that he was so employed? What fate pursued him that he could not, in all the resources of his brain, hit upon a device for such a simple end more convincing than this? Still, with an end not worth attaining, the author here wrought successfully. The story is child's play compared with many invented, for instance, by Wilkie Collins; but in combination with Dickens's

genuine powers, it produces its designed effect; we move in a world of choking fog and squalid pitfalls, amid plot and counterplot, cold self-interest and passion over-wrought, and can never refuse attention to the magician who shows it all.

I have left it to this place to speak of the sin, most gross, most palpable, which Dickens everywhere commits in his abuse of "coincidence". *Bleak House* is the supreme example of his recklessness. It seems never to have occurred to him, thus far in his career, that novels and fairy tales (or his favourite *Arabian Nights*) should obey different laws in the matter of incident. When Oliver Twist casually makes acquaintance with an old gentleman in the streets of London, this old gentleman of course turns out to be his relative, who desired of all things to discover the boy. When Steerforth returns to England from his travels with Emily, his ship is of course wrecked on the sands at Yarmouth, and his dead body washed up at the feet of David Copperfield, who happened to have made a little journey to see his Yarmouth friends on that very day. In *Bleak House* scarcely a page but presents some coincidence as glaring as these. Therein lies the worthlessness of the plot, which is held together only by the use of coincidence in its most flagrant forms. Grant that anything may happen just where or when the interest of the story demands it, and a neat drama may pretty easily be con-

structed. The very boldness of the thing prevents readers from considering it; indeed most readers take the author's own view, and imagine every artificiality to be permitted in the world of fiction.

Dickens was content to have aroused interest, wonder, and many other emotions. The conception of the book is striking; the atmosphere could hardly be better; even the melodrama (as in Krook's death by spontaneous combustion) justifies itself by magnificent workmanship. No doubt the generality of readers are wise, and it is pedantry to object to the logical extremes of convention in an art which, without convention, would not exist.

One wishes that Esther Summerson had not been allowed to write in her own person—or rather to assume, with such remarkable success, the personality of Charles Dickens. This well-meaning young woman, so blind to her own merits, of course had no idea that she was a great humorist and a writer of admirable narrative; but readers (again the reflective few) are only too much impressed by her powers. Again one closes his eyes, and suffers a glad illusion. But for the occasional "I" one may easily enough forget that Miss Summerson is speaking.

I must pass rapidly over the novels that remain. Of *Little Dorrit* (1855), as of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, who can pretend to bear the story in mind? There is again a moral theme: the evils of greed

and vulgar ambition. As a rule, we find this book dismissed rather contemptuously; it is held to be tedious, and unlike Dickens in its prevalent air of gloom. For all that, I believe it to contain some of his finest work, some passages in which he attains an artistic finish hardly found elsewhere; and to these I shall return. There were reasons why the book should be lacking in the old vivacity—never indeed to be recovered, in so far as it had belonged to the golden years of youth; it was written in a time of domestic unhappiness and of much unsettlement, the natural result of which appeared three years later, when Dickens left the study for the platform. As a narrative, *Little Dorrit* is far from successful; it is cumbered with mysteries which prove futile, and has no proportion in its contrasting parts. Here and there the hand of the master is plainly weary.

More so, however, in the only other full-length novel which he lived to complete. None of his books is so open to the charge of tedious superfluity as *Our Mutual Friend* (1865); on many a page dialogue which is strictly no dialogue at all, but mere verbosity in a vein of forced humour, drags its slow length along in caricature of the author at his best. A plot, depending on all manner of fantastic circumstances, unfolds itself with dreary elaboration, and surely delights no one. Yet I have a sense of ingratitude in speak-

ing thus of *Our Mutual Friend*; for in it Dickens went far towards breaking with his worst theatrical traditions, and nowhere, I think, irritates one with a violent improbability in the management of his occurrences. The multiplication of wills, as Dickens insisted in reply to criticism, need not trouble anyone who reads the newspapers; at worst it lacks interest. With anything, however, but gratification, one notes that the author is adapting himself to a new time, new people, new manners. Far behind us are the stage-coach and the brandy-drinkers; the age, if more respectable, has become decidedly duller. Even so with Dickens; he feels the constraint of a day to which he was not born, and whilst bending himself to its demands, succeeds only in making us regret the times gone by.

For new schools of fiction have meanwhile arisen in England. Charlotte Brontë has sent forth her three books; Kingsley is writing, and Charles Reade, and Anthony Trollope; George Meredith, and, later, George Eliot, have begun their careers. We are in the time of "The Origin of Species". A veteran in every sense but the literal, Dickens keeps his vast popularity, but cannot hope to do more than remind his readers (and his hearers) of all that he had achieved.

Of *Hard Times*, I have said nothing; it is practically a forgotten book, and little in it demands attention. Two other short novels

remain to be mentioned (the Christmas books belong to a class that does not call for criticism in this place), and one of them, *Great Expectations* (1861), would be nearly perfect in its mechanism but for the unhappy deference to Lord Lytton's judgment, which caused the end to be altered. Dickens meant to have left Pip a lonely man, and of course rightly so; by the irony of fate he was induced to spoil his work through a brother novelist's desire for a happy ending—a strange thing, indeed, to befall Dickens. Observe how finely the narrative is kept in one key. It begins with a mournful impression—the foggy marshes spreading drearily by the seaward Thames—and throughout recurs this effect of cold and damp and dreariness; in that kind Dickens never did anything so good. Despite the subject, we have no stage fire—except around the person of Mr. Wopsle, a charming bit of satire, recalling and contrasting with the far-off days of *Nickleby*. The one unsatisfactory feature is the part concerned with Miss Havisham and Estella. Here the old Dickens survives in unhappy fashion; unable to resist the lure of eccentricity, but no longer presenting it with the gusto which was wont to be more than an excuse. Passing this, one can hardly overpraise the workmanship. No story in the first person was ever better told.

Of the *Tale of Two Cities* (1859) it is impossible to speak so favourably. Like *Barnaby Rudge* a

historical novel, it is better constructed than that early book, but by no means so alive. In his two novels dealing with a past time, Dickens attacks the two things he most hated in the present: religious fanaticism and social tyranny. *Barnaby* is in all senses a characteristic book. The *Tale of Two Cities* can hardly be called so in anything but its theme. The novelist here laid a restraint upon himself; he aimed deliberately at writing a story for the story's sake; the one thing he had never yet been able to do. Among other presumed superfluities, humour is dismissed. To some readers the result appears admirable; for my part, I feel the restraint throughout, miss the best of my author, and, whilst admitting that he has produced something like a true tragedy, reflect that many another man could have handled the theme as well, if not better. It leaves no strong impression on my mind; even the figure of Carton soon grows dim against a dimmer background.

In the autumn of 1867 Dickens left England on his second voyage across the Atlantic, to give that long series of public readings which shattered his health and sent him back a doomed man. Upon this aspect of his public life something will be said in a later chapter. The spring of 1868 saw him return, and before the end of the year he had entered upon a series of farewell readings in his own country. Defiant of the gravest physical

symptoms,—it was not in the man's nature to believe that he could be beaten in anything he undertook,—he laboured through a self-imposed duty which would have tasked him severely even in the time of robust health, and finally took leave of his audience on the 5th of April, 1870. Meanwhile (in a few months of rest to which he was constrained by medical advice) he had begun the writing of a new book, which was to appear in twelve monthly numbers, instead of the old heroic twenty; its name, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Six numbers only were finished. As an indication of the disturbance of mental habit caused by the author's life as a public entertainer, Forster mentions that Dickens miscalculated the length (in print) of his first two parts by no less than twelve pages: ominous error in one who had rarely found his calculation in this matter wrong even by a line. Beyond the sixth part, only a disjointed scene was written. He worked in his garden house at Gadshill—the home endeared to him by Shakespearean associations—till the evening of the 8th of June, and an hour or two later was seized by fatal illness. The next day he died.

Edwin Drood would probably have been his best-constructed book: as far as it goes, the story hangs well together, showing a care in the contrivance of detail which is more than commonly justified by the result. One cannot help wishing

that Dickens had chosen another subject—one in which there was neither mystery nor murder, both so irresistibly attractive to him, yet so far from being the true material of his art. Surely it is unfortunate that the last work of a great writer should have for its theme nothing more human than a trivial mystery woven about a vulgar deed of blood. For this, it seems to me, his public readings may well have been responsible. In the last series he had made a great impression by his rendering (acting, indeed) of the death of Nancy in *Oliver Twist*. The thing, utterly unworthy of him in this shape, had cost him great pains; his imagination was drenched with gore, preoccupied with a sordid horror. Casting about him for a new story, he saw murder at the end of every vista. It would not have been thus if he had lived a calmer life, with natural development of his thoughts. In that case we might have had some true successor to *David Copperfield*. His selection of scene was happy and promising—the old city of his childhood, Rochester. The tone, too, of his descriptive passages is much more appropriate than the subject. But Dickens had made his choice in life, and therefrom inevitably resulted his course in literature.

CHAPTER IV

ART, VERACITY, AND MORAL PURPOSE

It is a thankless task to write of such a man as Dickens in disparaging phrase. I am impatient to reach that point of my essay where I shall be at liberty to speak with admiration unstinted, to dwell upon the strength of the master's work, and exalt him where he is unsurpassed. But it is necessary to clear the way. So great a change has come over the theory and practice of fiction in the England of our times that we must needs treat of Dickens as, in many respects, antiquated. To be antiquated is not necessarily to be condemned, in art or anything else (save weapons of slaughter); but as the result of the last chapter we feel that, in one direction, Dickens suffers from a comparison with novelists, his peers, of a newer day, even with some who were strictly his contemporaries. We have now to ask ourselves in what other aspects his work differs markedly from our present conception of the art of novel-writing. It will be seen, of course, that, theoretically, he had very little in common with the school of strict veracity, of realism—call it what you please; the school which, quite apart from extravagances, has directed fiction into a

path it is likely to pursue for many a year to come. Hard words are spoken of him by young writers whose zeal outruns their discretion, and far outstrips their knowledge; from the advanced posts of modern criticism any stone is good enough to throw at a novelist who avows and glories in his moral purpose; who would on no account bring a blush to the middle-class cheek; who at any moment tampers with truth of circumstance, that his readers may have joy rather than sorrow. Well, we must look into this matter, and, as Captain Cuttle says, take its bearings. Endeavouring to judge Dickens as a man of his time, we must see in what spirit he approached his tasks; what he consciously sought to achieve in this pursuit of story-telling. One thing, assuredly, can never become old-fashioned in any disdainful sense; that is, sincerity of purpose. Novelists of to-day desire above everything to be recognized as sincere in their picturing of life. If Dickens prove to be no less honest, according to his lights, we must then glance at the reasons which remove him so far from us in his artistic design and execution.

Much fault has been found with Forster's *Biography*, which is generally blamed as giving undue prominence to the figure of the biographer. I cannot join in this censure; I prefer to echo the praise of Thomas Carlyle: "So long as Dickens is interesting to his fellow-men, here

will be seen, face to face, what Dickens's manner of existing was". Carlyle, I conceive, was no bad judge of a biography; as a worker in literature he appreciated this vivid presentment of a fellow-worker. I should say, indeed, that there exists no book more inspiriting and fortifying to a young man beginning his struggle in the world of letters (especially, of course, to the young novelist) than this of Forster's. And simply because it exhibits in such rich detail the story, and the manner, of Dickens's work; showing him at his desk day by day, recounting his hidden difficulties, his secret triumphs; in short, making the man live over again before us the noblest portion of his life.

One thing to be learnt from every page of the biography is the strenuous spirit in which Dickens wrought. Whatever our judgment as to the result, his zeal and energy were those of the born artist. Passages numberless might be quoted from his letters, showing how he enjoyed the labour of production, how he threw himself into the imaginative world with which he was occupied, how impossible it was for him to put less than *all* his splendid force into the task of the moment. A good instance is the following. He writes to tell his friend Forster of some private annoyance, which had threatened to upset his day's work. "I was most horribly put out for a little while; for I had got up early

to go to work, and was full of interest in what I had to do. But having eased my mind by that note to you, and taken a turn or two up and down the room, I went at it again, and soon got so interested that I blazed away till nine last night; only stopping ten minutes for dinner. I suppose I wrote eight printed pages of *Chuzzlewit* yesterday. The consequence is that I *could* finish it to-day, but am taking it easy, and making myself laugh very much." (Forster, Book iv, chap. 2.) Year after year, he keeps his friend minutely informed by letter of the progress he makes with every book; consults him on endless points, great and small; is inexhaustible in gossip about himself, which never appears egoistic because of the artistic earnestness declared in every syllable. With no whit less conscientiousness did he discharge his duties as editor of a magazine. We find him writing to Forster: "I have had a story"—accepted from an imperfectly qualified contributor—"to hack and hew into some form for *Household Words* this morning, which has taken me four hours of close attention". Four hours of Dickens's time, in the year 1856, devoted to such a matter as this!—where any ordinary editor, or rather his assistant, would have contented himself with a few blottings and insertions, sure that "the great big stupid public", as Thackeray called it, would be no better pleased,

toil how one might. To Dickens the public was not everything; he could not rest until the deformities of that little bit of writing were removed, and no longer offended his eye.

Even so. On the other hand, having it in mind to make a certain use of a character in *Dombey and Son*, he seriously asks Forster: "Do you think it may be done, without making people angry?"

Here is the contradiction so irritating to Dickens's severer critics, the artistic generation of to-day. What!—they exclaim—a great writer, inspired with a thoroughly fine idea, is to stay his hand until he has made grave inquiry whether Messrs. Mudie's subscribers will approve it or not! The mere suggestion is infuriating. And this—they vociferate—is what Dickens was always doing. It may be true that he worked like a Trojan; but what is the use of work, meant to be artistic, carried on in hourly fear of Mrs. Grundy! Fingers are pointed to this, that, and the other Continental novelist; can you imagine *him* in such sorry plight? Why, nothing would have pleased him better than to know he was outraging public sentiment! In fact, it is only when one *does* so that one's work has a chance of being good!

All which may be true enough in relation to the speakers. As regards Dickens, it is irrelevant. Dickens had before him no such artistic ideal; he

never desired freedom to offend his public. Sympathy with his readers was to him the very breath of life; the more complete that sympathy, the better did he esteem his work. Of the restrictions laid upon him he was perfectly aware, and there is evidence that he could see the artistic advantage which would result from a slackening of the bonds of English delicacy; but it never occurred to him to make public protest against the prejudices in force. Dickens could never have regarded it as within a story-teller's scope to attempt the conversion of his readers to a new view of literary morals. Against a political folly, or a social injustice, he would use every resource of his art, and see no reason to hesitate; for there was the certainty of the approval of all good folk. To write a novel in a spirit of antagonism to all but a very few of his countrymen would have seemed to him a sort of practical *bull*; is it not the law of novel-writing, first and foremost, that one shall aim at pleasing as many people as possible?

In his preface to *Pendennis* Thackeray spoke very plainly on this subject. He honestly told his readers that they must not expect to find in his novel the whole truth about the life of a young man, seeing that, since the author of *Tom Jones*, no English writer had been permitted such frankness. The same thing is remarked by Dickens in a letter which Forster prints; a letter written

from Paris, and commenting on the inconsistency of English people, who, living abroad and reading foreign authors, complain that "the hero of an English book is always uninteresting". He proceeds: "But O my smooth friend, what a shining impostor you must think yourself, and what an ass you must think me, when you suppose that by putting a brazen face upon it you can blot out of my knowledge the fact that this same unnatural young gentleman (if to be decent is to be necessarily unnatural), whom you meet in those other books and in mine, *must* be presented to you in that unnatural aspect by reason of your morality, and is not to have, I will not say any of the indecencies you like, but not even any of the experiences, trials, perplexities, and confusions inseparable from the making or unmaking of all men!" (Forster, Book xi, chap. 1). This he clearly saw; but it never disturbed his conscience, for the reason indicated. Thackeray, we may be sure, thought much more on the subject, and in graver mood; and as a result, he allowed himself more liberty than Dickens—not without protest from the many-headed. There existed this difference between the two men. Thackeray had a kind of strength not given to his brother in art.

Only in one way can the public evince its sympathy with an author—by purchasing his books. It follows, then, that Dickens attached

great importance to the varying demand for his complete novels, or for the separate monthly parts at their time of issue. Here again is a stone of stumbling for the disinterested artist who reads Dickens's life. We may select two crucial examples.

After the first visit to America began the publication of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and it was seen at once that the instalments from month to month were less favourably received than those of the earlier books. The sixty thousand or so of regular purchasers decreased by about two-thirds. "Whatever the causes," says Forster, "here was the undeniable fact of a grave depreciation of sale in his writings, unaccompanied by any falling off either in themselves or in the writer's reputation. It was very temporary; but it was present, and to be dealt with accordingly." (Book iv, chap. 2.) Dickens's way of dealing with it was to make his hero suddenly resolve to go to America. Number Four closed with that declaration, and its results were seen, we are told, in an additional two thousand purchasers. Forster's words, of course, represent Dickens's view of the matter, which amounts to this: that however thoroughly assured an author may be that he is doing his best, a falling-off in the sale of his work must needs cause him grave mental disturbance; nay, that it must prompt him, as a matter of course, to changes of plan and solicitous calcu-

lation. He is to write, in short, with an eye steadily fixed upon his publisher's sale-room; never to lose sight of that index of popular approval or the reverse. That phrase "to be dealt with accordingly" is more distasteful than one can easily express to anyone with a tincture of latter-day conscientiousness in things of art. As I have said, it can be explained in a sense not at all dishonourable to Dickens; but how much more pleasant would it be to read in its place some quite unparliamentary utterance such, for example, as Scott made use of when William Blackwood requested him to change the end of one of his stories!

It sounds odd to praise Scott, from this point of view, at the expense of Dickens. As a conscientious workman Dickens is far ahead of the author of *Waverley*, who never dreamt of taking such pains as with the other novelist became habitual. We know, too, that Scott avowedly wrote for money, and varied his subjects in accordance with the varying public taste. But let us suppose that his novels had appeared in monthly parts, and that such an experience had befallen him as this of Dickens; can we easily imagine Walter Scott, in an attitude of commercial despondency, anxiously deliberating on the subject of his next chapter? The thing is inconceivable. It marks the difference not only between two men, but two epochs. Not with

impunity, for all his generous endowments, did Dickens come to manhood in the year 1832—the year in which Sir Walter said farewell to a world he no longer recognized.

The other case which I think it worth while to mention is that of Dickens's first Christmas story, the *Carol*. In those days Christmas publications did not come out three or four months before the season they were meant to celebrate The *Carol* appeared only just before Christmas Eve; it was seized upon with enthusiasm, and edition followed edition. Unluckily, the publisher had not exercised prudence in the "cost of production"; the profits were small, and as a consequence we have the following letter, addressed to Forster in January, 1844: "Such a night as I have passed! I really believed I should never get up again until I had passed through all the horrors of a fever. I found the *Carol* accounts awaiting me, and they were the cause of it. The first six thousand copies show a profit of £230! and the last four will yield as much more. I had set my heart and soul upon a thousand clear. What a wonderful thing it is that such a great success should occasion me such intolerable anxiety and disappointment! My year's bills, unpaid, are so terrific, that all the energy and determination I can possibly exert will be required to clear me before I go abroad." (Book iv, chap. 2.) Now this letter is very disagreeable reading; for, at so

early a stage in its writer's career, it points already to the end. Those "terrific" bills—had they been less terrific, say, by only one quarter, and had they been consistently kept at a point below the terrifying—how much better for Dickens himself and for the world! It could not be. The great middle class was growing enormously rich with its coal-mines and steam-engines, and the fact of his being an artist did not excuse a member of that class from the British necessity of keeping up appearances. So we have all but the "horrors of a fever" because a little book, which Thackeray rightly called "a national benefit", brought in only a certain sum of money! In his perturbation Dickens does himself injustice. He had *not* "set his heart and soul" on a thousand pounds; he never in all his life set his heart and soul on wealth. "No man", he said once, in talk with friends, "attaches less importance to the possession of money, or less disparagement to the want of it, than I do"; and he spoke essential truth. It would be quite unjust to think of Dickens as invariably writing in fear of diminishing sales, or as trembling with cupidity whenever he opened his publishers' accounts. To understand the whole man we must needs remark the commercial side of him; but his genius saved him from the worst results of the commercial spirit.

It was not only of money that he stood in need.

Remember his theatrical leanings, and one understands without difficulty how important to him was the stimulus of praise. From the early days, as has often been observed, the relations between Dickens and his public were notably personal; in his study, he sat, as it were, with hearers grouped about him, conscious of their presence, happily, in quite another way than that already noticed. Like the actor (which indeed he ultimately became), his desire was for instant applause. Dickens could never have struggled for long years against the lack of appreciation. In coldness towards his work he would have seen its literary condemnation, and have turned to a new endeavour. When the readers of *Martin Chuzzlewit* fall off he is troubled, first and foremost, by the failure of popular sympathy. He asks himself, most anxiously, what the cause can be; and, with a touching deference to the voice of the crowd, is inclined to think that he has grown less interesting. For observe that Dickens never conceives himself, when he aims at popularity, as writing *down* to his audience. Of that he is wholly incapable; for that he has too much understanding of the conditions of literary success. Never yet was great popularity, in whatsoever class, achieved by deliberate pursuit of a low ideal. The silliest story which ever enjoyed a vast vogue among the silliest readers was a true representation of the author's mind; for

only to writing of this kind—sincere though in foolishness—comes a response from multitudes of readers. Dickens might alter his intention, might change his theme; but he never did so with the thought that he was condescending. In this respect a true democrat, he believed, probably without ever reflecting upon it, that the approved of the people was necessarily the supreme in art. At the same time, never man wrought more energetically to justify the people's choice.

How does this attitude of mind affect Dickens's veracity as an artist concerned with everyday life? In what degree, and in what directions, does he feel himself at liberty to disguise facts, to modify circumstances, for the sake of giving pleasure or avoiding offence?

Our "realist" will hear of no such paltering with "truth". Heedless of Pilate's question, he takes for granted that the truth can be got at, and that it is his plain duty to set it down without compromise; or, if less crude in his perceptions, he holds that truth, for the artist, is the impression produced on *him*, and that to convey this impression with entire sincerity is his sole reason for existing. To Dickens such a view of the artist's duty never presented itself. Art, for him, was art precisely because it was not nature. Even our realists may recognize this, and may grant that it is the business of art to select, to dispose—under penalties if the result be falsifica-

tion. But Dickens went further; he had a moral purpose; the thing above all others scornfully forbidden in our schools of rigid "naturalism".

Let it not be forgotten that he made his public protest—moderate enough, but yet a protest—against smooth conventionalism. In the preface to *Nicholas Nickleby* he defends himself against those who censured him for not having made his hero "always blameless and agreeable". He had seen no reason, he says, for departing from the plain facts of human character. This is interesting when we call to mind the personality of Nicholas, who must have got into very refined company for his humanity to prove offensive. But the English novel was at a sorry pass in that day, and doubtless Dickens seriously believed that he had taken a bold step towards naturalism (had he known the word). Indeed, was he not justified in thinking so? Who, if not Dickens, founded the later school of English fiction? He who as a young man had unconsciously obeyed Goethe's precept, taking hold upon the life nearest to him, making use of it for literature, and proving that it *was* of interest, could rightly claim the honours of an innovator.

The preface to *Oliver Twist*, in defending his choice of subject, strikes the note of compromise, and at the same time declares in simple terms the author's purpose. After speaking of the romances of highwaymen then in vogue, which he held to

be harmful, because so false to experience, he tells how he had resolved to give a true picture of a band of thieves, seeing no reason "why the dregs of life (as long as their speech did not offend the ear) should not serve the purpose of a moral". Here, then, we have it stated plainly that we are not to look for complete verisimilitude in the speech of his characters, and, again, that he only exhibits these characters *in terrorem*, or, at all events, to induce grave thoughts. When I come to discuss in detail Dickens's characterization I shall have to ask how far it is possible truthfully to represent a foul-mouthed person, whilst taking care that the words he uses do not "offend the ear". Here I wish only to indicate the limits which Dickens imposed upon himself. He, it is clear, had no misgiving; to him Bill Sikes and Nancy and Charley Bates were convincing figures, though they never once utter a vile word—which, as a matter of fact, they one and all did in every other breath. He did not deliberately sacrifice truth to refinement. Moreover, he was convinced that he had done a moral service to the world. That both these ends were attained by help of unexampled buoyancy of spirit, an unfailing flow of the healthiest mirth, the kindliest humour, should in consistency appear to us the strangest thing of all—to us who strive so hard for "atmosphere", insist so strongly upon "objectivity" in the author,

But in this matter Dickens troubled himself with no theory or argument. He wrote as his soul dictated, and surely could not have done better.

Admitting his limits, accepting them even gladly, he was yet possessed with a sense of the absolute reality of everything he pictured forth. Had the word been in use he must necessarily have called himself a Realist. This is one of the biographical commonplaces concerning Dickens. Everyone knows how he excited himself over his writing, how he laughed and cried with his imaginary people, how he all but made himself ill with grief over the death-bed of little Nell or of Paul Dombey. This means, of course, that his imagination worked with perfect freedom, had the fullest scope, yet never came into conflict with the prepossessions of his public. Permission to write as Smollett and as Fielding wrote could in no way have advantaged Dickens. He was the born story-teller of a certain day, of a certain class. Again, he does not deem himself the creator of a world, but the laboriously faithful painter of that about him. He labours his utmost to preserve illusion. Dickens could never have been guilty of that capital crime against art so light-heartedly committed by Anthony Trollope, who will begin a paragraph in his novels with some such words as these: "Now, if this were fact, and not a story . . ." For all that,

Trollope was the more literal copier of life. But his figures do not survive as those of Dickens, who did in fact create—created individuals, to become at once and for ever representative of their time.

Whilst at work, no questioning troubled him. But in speaking of the results, he occasionally allows us a glimpse of his mind; we see how he reconciled art with veracity. The best instance I can recall is his comment upon "Doctor Marigold", the Cheap-Jack, of whom he drew so sympathetic a picture. He says, "It is wonderfully like the real thing, of course a little refined and humoured". Note the *of course*. Art was art, not nature. He had to make his Cheap-Jack presentable, to disguise anything repellent, to bring out every interesting and attractive quality. A literal transcript of the man's being would not have seemed to him within his province. But it is just this "refining" and "humouring" which many in our day hold traitorous; the outcome of it is called Idealism.

At times Dickens's idealism goes further, leading him into misrepresentation of social facts. Refining and humouring, even from his point of view, must have their limits; and these he altogether exceeded in a character such as Lizzie Hexam, the heroine of *Our Mutual Friend*. The child of a Thames-side loafer, uneducated, and brought up amid the roughest surroundings,

Lizzie uses language and expresses sentiment which would do credit to a lady in whatsoever position. In the same way, the girl called Alice Marlow, who plays so melodramatic a part in *Dombey and Son*, represents a total impossibility, the combination of base origin and squalid life, with striking mental power, strikingly developed. This kind of thing is permissible to no artist who deals with the actual world. Using a phrase germane to our subject, it is morally mischievous. Many a novelist has sinned in this direction; above all, young authors misled by motives alien to art, who delight in idealizing girls of the lower, or lowest class. Dickens had outgrown that stage of pardonable weakness when he wrote *Our Mutual Friend*. He wished, of course, to contrast the low-born Lizzie Hexam with persons, in the same story, of what is called good birth and breeding, and to show her their superior; a purpose which aggravates his fault, the comparison being so obviously unfair. In this connection I recall a figure from Thackeray: the uneducated girl with whom Arthur Pendennis forms a perilous acquaintance. Fanny Bolton is one of the truest characters in all fiction,—so unpleasantly true, that readers ignorant of her class might imagine the author to have drawn her in a spirit of social prejudice. Never was his hand more admirably just. Fanny Bolton is one of the instances I had in mind when I alluded to Thackeray's power

in describing other modes of life than that with which his name is associated.

Here Dickens idealized to please himself. In the end, it came to the same thing when we see him hesitating over a design of which he doubted the popular acceptance. Walter Gay, in *Dombey and Son*, whose career is so delightfully prosperous, seemed at one moment about to be condemned to a very different fate. "I think", writes Dickens in a letter, "it would be a good thing to disappoint all the expectations this chapter seems to raise of his happy connection with the story and the heroine, and to show him gradually and naturally trailing away from that love of adventure and boyish light-heartedness, into negligence, idleness, dissipation, dishonesty, and ruin. To show, in short, that common, everyday miserable declension, of which we know so much in our ordinary life." (Forster, Book vi, chap. 2.) Here, indeed, is a suggestion of "realism"; but we know, in reading it, that Dickens could never have carried it out. He adds, "Do you think it may be done, without making people angry?" Certainly it could not; Dickens knew it could not, even when the artist deep within him brooded over the theme; he gave it up almost at once. Forster points out that something of the same idea was eventually used in *Bleak House*. But Richard Carstone, though he wastes his life, does not sink to

"dissipation, dishonesty, and ruin". The hand was stayed where the picture would have become too painful alike for author and public—always, or nearly always, in such entire sympathy. The phrase about "making people angry" signifies much less than it would in a novelist of to-day. It might well have taken the form: "Can I bring *myself* to do this thing?"

To return for a moment to *Our Mutual Friend*, I never look into that book without feeling a suspicion that Dickens originally meant Mr. Boffin to suffer a real change of character, to become in truth the miserly curmudgeon which we are told he only pretended to be. Careful reading of the chapters which bear on this point has confirmed my impression; for which, however, there is no support that I know of, in Forster or elsewhere. It may well have been that here again Dickens, face to face with an unpleasant bit of truth, felt his heart fail him. Again he may have asked, "Will it make people angry?" If so—on this I wish to insist—it was in no spirit of dishonest compliance that he changed his plan. To make people angry would have been to defeat his own prime purpose. Granting two possible Mr. Boffins: he who becomes a miser in reality, and he who, for a good purpose, acts the miser's part; how much better to choose the Mr. Boffin who will end in hearty laughter and overflowing benevolence!

Avoidance of the disagreeable, as a topic uncongenial to art—this is Dickens's principle. There results, necessarily, a rather serious omission from his picture of life. Writing once from Boulogne, and describing the pier as he saw it of an evening, he says, "I never did behold such specimens of the youth of my country, male and female, as pervade that place. They are really in their vulgarity and insolence quite disheartening. One is so fearfully ashamed of them, and they contrast so very unfavourably with the natives." (Forster, Book vii, chap. 4.) But Dickens certainly had no need to visit Boulogne to study English "vulgarity and insolence"; it blared around him wherever he walked in London, and, had he wrought in another spirit, it must have taken a very large place in every one of his books. He avoided it, or showed it only in such forms as amused rather than disgusted. The Boulogne pier-walker, a significant figure of that day, deserved his niche in fiction; Dickens glanced at him, and passed him by.

Two examples dwell in my memory which show him in the mood for downright fact of the unpleasant sort. More might be discovered, but these, I think, would remain the noteworthy instances of "realism" in Dickens; moments when, for whatever reason, he saw fit to tell a harsh truth without any mitigation. One occurs in the short story of *Doctor Marigold*. We have

seen that the figure of the Cheap-Jack was "refined and humoured"; not so that of the Cheap-Jack's wife, the brutal woman who ill-uses and all but kills her child. This picture is remorseless in everyday truth; no humour softens it, no arbitrary event checks the course of the woman's hateful cruelty. The second example is *George Silverman's Explanation*, another short story, which from beginning to end is written in a tone of uncompromising bitterness. Being told by Silverman himself, its consistent gloom is dramatically appropriate and skilful. Here we have a picture of pietistic virulence the like of which cannot be found elsewhere in Dickens; hard bare fact; never a smile to lighten the impression; no interference with the rigour of destiny. Anything but characteristic, this little story is still a notable instance of Dickens's power. Were the author unknown it would be attributed to some strenuous follower of the "naturalist" school.

From his duty, as he conceived it, of teaching a moral lesson, Dickens never departs. He has an unfailing sense of the high importance of his work from this point of view. Not that it preoccupies him, as was the case with George Eliot, and weighs upon him as he writes; naturally and calmly, without suspicion of pose, without troublous searching of conscience, he sees his subject as a moral lesson, and cannot understand the position of an artist to whom such thought

never occurs. And his morality is of the simplest; a few plain ordinances serve for human guidance; to infringe them is to be marked for punishment more or less sensational; to follow the path of the just is to ensure a certain amount of prosperity, and reward unlimited in buoyancy of heart. The generality of readers like to see a scoundrel get his deserts, and Dickens, for the most part, gives them abundant satisfaction. No half-measures. When Pecksniff is unmasked, we have the joy of seeing him felled to the ground in the presence of a jubilant company. Nor does this suffice; he and his daughter Cherry, both having forfeited all the sympathies of decent folk, come to actual beggary, and prowl about the murky streets. Nothing more improbable than such an end for Mr. Pecksniff or for his daughter—who was very well able to take care of herself; and obviously a deeper moral would be implied in the continued flourishing of both; but Dickens and his public were impatient to see the rascal in the dirt, the shrew beside him. Sampson Brass and his sister, whose crime against society is much more serious, pass their later years in the same squalid defeat; yet we feel assured that the virile Sally, at all events, made a much better fight against the consequences of her rascality. Lady Dedlock, having sinned in a manner peculiarly unpardonable, is driven by remorse from her luxurious home, and expires in one of the foulest corners

of London. Remorse alone, however poignant and enduring, would not seem an adequate penalty; we must see the proud lady, the sinful woman, literally brought low, down to the level of the poor wretch who was her accomplice. Ill-doers less conspicuous are let off with a punishment which can be viewed facetiously, but punished they are. It is all so satisfying; it so rounds off our conception of life. Nothing so abhorred by the multitude as a lack of finality in stories, a vagueness of conclusion which gives them the trouble of forming surmises.

Equally of course, justice is tempered with mercy. Who would have the heart to demand rigour of the law for Mr. Jingle and Job Trotter? We see them all but starved to death in a debtors' prison, and that is enough; their conversion to honesty gives such scope for Mr. Pickwick's delightful goodness that nothing could be more in accord with the fitness of things. Squeers or Mr. Brass we will by no means forgive; nay, of their hard lot, so well merited, we will make all the fun we can; but many a pleasant scamp who has shaken our sides shall be put in the way of earning an honest living. Profoundly human, however crude to an age that cannot laugh and cry so readily. Good sound practical teaching, which will help the soul of man long after more pretentious work has returned to dust.

Ah, those final chapters of Dickens! How

eagerly they are read by the young, and with what a pleasant smile by elders who prize the good things of literature! No one is forgotten, and many an unsuspected bit of happiness calls aloud for gratitude to the author. Do you remember Mr. Mell, the underpaid and bullied usher in *David Copperfield*,—the poor broken-spirited fellow whose boots will not bear another mending,—who uses an hour of liberty to visit his mother in the alms-house, and gladden her heart by piping sorry music on his flute? We lose sight of him, utterly; knowing only that he has been sent about his business after provoking the displeasure of the insolent lad Steerforth. Then, do you remember how, at the end of the book, David has news from Australia, delicious news about Mr. Micawber, and Mrs. Gummidge, and sundry other people, and how, in reading the colonial paper, he suddenly comes upon the name of *Dr. Mell*, a distinguished man at the Antipodes? Who so stubborn a theorist that this kindly figment of the imagination does not please him? Who would prefer to learn the cold fact: that Mell, the rejected usher, sank from stage to stage of wretchedness, and died lamentably in the street or the workhouse?

It was not by computing the density of the common brain, by gauging the force of vulgar prejudice, that Charles Dickens rose to his supreme popularity. Nature made him the

mouthpiece of his kind, in all that relates to simple emotions and homely thought. Who can more rightly be called an artist than he who gave form and substance to the ideal of goodness and purity, of honour, justice, mercy, whereby the dim multitudes falteringly seek to guide their steps? This was his task in life, to embody the better dreams of ordinary men; to fix them as bright realities, for weary eyes to look upon. He achieved it in the strength of a faultless sympathy; following the true instincts which it is so unjust—so unintelligent—to interpret as mere commercial shrewdness or dulness of artistic perception. Art is not single; to every great man his province, his mode. During at least one whole generation, Charles Dickens, in the world of literature, meant England. For his art, splendidly triumphant, made visible to all mankind the characteristic virtues, the typical shortcomings, of the homely English race.

CHAPTER V

CHARACTERIZATION

The familiar objection to Dickens's characters, that they are "so unreal" (a criticism common in the mouths of persons who would be the last to tolerate downright verity in fiction), is in part explained—in part justified—by the dramatic conduct of his stories. What unreality there is, arises for the most part from necessities of "plot". This may be illustrated by a comparison between two figures wherein the master has embodied so much homely sweetness and rectitude that both are popular favourites. The boatman Peggotty and Joe Gargery the blacksmith are drawn on similar lines: in both the gentlest nature is manifest beneath a ruggedness proper to their callings. There is a certain resemblance, too, between the stories in which each plays his part; childlike in their simple virtues, both become strongly attached to a child—not their own—living under the same roof, and both suffer a grave disappointment in this affection; the boatman's niece is beguiled from him to her ruin, the blacksmith's little relative grows into a conceited youth ashamed of the old companion and the old home. To readers in general I

presume that Peggotty is better known than Joe; *David Copperfield* being more frequently read than *Great Expectations*; but if we compare the two figures as to their "reality", we must decide in favour of Gargery. I think him a better piece of workmanship all round; the prime reason, however, for his standing out so much more solidly in one's mind than Little Emily's uncle is that he lives in a world, not of melodrama, but of everyday cause and effect. The convict Magwitch and his strange doings make no such demand upon one's credulity as the story of Emily and Steerforth, told as it is, with its extravagant situations and flagrantly artificial development. Pip is so thoroughly alive that we can forget his dim relations with Satis House. But who can put faith in Mr. Peggotty, when he sets forth to search for his niece over the highways and by-ways of Europe? Who can for a moment put faith in Emily herself after she has ceased to be the betrothed of Ham? As easily could one believe that David Copperfield actually overheard that wildly fantastic dialogue in the lodging-house between the lost girl and Rosa Dartle.

Many such examples might be adduced of excellent, or masterly, characterization spoilt by the demand for effective intrigue. We call to mind this or that person in circumstances impossible of credit; and hastily declare that

character and situation are alike unreal. And hereby hangs another point worth touching upon. I have heard it very truly remarked that, in our day, people for the most part criticise Dickens from a recollection of their reading in childhood; they do not come fresh to him with mature minds; in general, they never read him at all after childish years. This is an obvious source of much injustice. Dickens is good reading for all times of life, as are all the great imaginative writers. Let him be read by children together with Don Quixote. But who can speak with authority of Cervantes who knows him only from an acquaintance made at ten years old? To the mind of a child Dickens is, or ought to be, fascinating—(alas for the whole subject of children's reading nowadays!)—and most of the fascination is due to that romantic treatment of common life which is part, indeed, of Dickens's merit, but has smaller value and interest to the older mind. Much of his finest humour is lost upon children; much of his perfect description, and all his highest achievement in characterization. Taking Dickens "as read", people inflict a loss upon themselves and do a wrong to the author. Who, in childhood, ever cared much for *Little Dorrit*? The reason is plain; in this book Dickens has comparatively little of his wonted buoyancy; throughout, it is in a graver key. True, a house falls down in a most exciting way,

and this the reader will remember; all else is to him a waste. We hear, accordingly, that nothing good can be said for *Little Dorrit*. Whereas, a competent judge, taking up the book as he would any other, will find in it some of the best work Dickens ever did; and especially in this matter of characterization; pictures so wholly admirable, so marvellously observed and so exquisitely presented, that he is tempted to place *Little Dorrit* among the best of the novels.

Again, it is not unusual to seek in Dickens's characters for something he never intended to be there; in other words, his figures are often slighted because they represent a class in society which lacks many qualities desired by cultivated readers, and possesses very prominently the distasteful features such a critic could well dispense with. You lay down, for instance, Thackeray's *Pendennis*, and soon after you happen to take up *Dombey and Son*. Comparisons arise. Whilst reading of Major Bagstock, you find your thoughts wandering to Major Pendennis; when occupied (rather disdainfully) with Mr. Toots, you suddenly recall Foker. What can be the immediate outcome of such contrast? It seems impossible to deny to Thackeray a great superiority in the drawing of character; his aristocratic Major and his wealthy young jackass are so much more "real", that is to say, so much more familiar,

than the promoted vulgarian Bagstock and the enriched whipper-snapper Toots. A hasty person would be capable of exclaiming that Dickens had plainly taken suggestions from Thackeray, and made but poor use of them. Observe, however, that *Dombey and Son* appeared, complete, in 1848; *Pendennis* in 1849. Observe, too, the explanation of the whole matter: that Bagstock and Toots represent quite as truthfully figures possible in a certain class, as do Thackeray's characters those to be found in a rank distinctly higher. If Thackeray (who needed no suggestions from others' books) was indeed conscious of this whimsical parallel, we can only admire the skill and finish with which he worked it out. But assuredly he dreamt of no slight to Dickens's performance. They had wrought in different material. Social distinctions are sufficiently pronounced even in our time of revolution; fifty years ago they were much more so. And precisely what estranges the cultivated reader in Bagstock and Toots, is nothing more nor less than evidence of their creator's truthfulness.

A wider question confronts one in looking steadfastly at the masterpieces of a novelist concerned with the lower, sometimes the lowest, modes of life in a great city. Among all the names immortalized by Dickens none is more widely familiar than that of Mrs. Gamp. It is universally admitted that in Mrs. Gamp we have

a creation such as can be met with only in the greatest writers; a figure at once individual and typical; a marvel of humorous presentment; vital in the highest degree attainable by this art of fiction. From the day of her first appearance on the stage, Mrs. Gamp has been a delight, a wonder, a by-word. She stands unique, no other novelist can show a piece of work, in the same kind, worthy of a place beside her; we must go to the very heights of world-literature, to him who bodied forth Dame Quickly, and Juliet's nurse, for the suggestion of equivalent power. Granted, then, that Mrs. Gamp has indubitable existence; who and what is she? Well, a so-called nurse, living in Kingsgate Street, Holborn, in a filthy room somewhere upstairs, and summoned for nursing of all kinds by persons more or less well-to-do, who are so unfortunate as to know of no less offensive substitute. We are told, and can believe, that in the year 1844 (the date of *Martin Chuzzlewit*) few people did know of any substitute for Mrs. Gamp; that she was an institution; that she carried her odious vices and her criminal incompetence from house to house in decent parts of London. Dickens knew her only too well; had observed her at moments of domestic crisis; had learnt her language and could reproduce it (or most of it) with surprising accuracy. In plain words, then, we are speaking of a very loathsome creature; a

sluttish, drunken, avaricious, dishonest woman. Meeting her in the flesh, we should shrink disgusted, so well does the foulness of her person correspond with the baseness of her mind. Hearing her speak, we should turn away in half-amused contempt. Yet, when we encounter her in the pages of Dickens, we cannot have too much of Mrs. Gamp's company; her talk is an occasion of uproarious mirth; we never dream of calling her to moral judgment, but laugh the more, the more infamously she sees fit to behave. Now, in what sense can this figure in literature be called a copy of the human original?

I am perfectly aware that this inquiry goes to the roots of the theory of Art. Here I have no space (nor would it be the proper moment) to discuss all the issues that are involved in a question so direct and natural; but if we are to talk at all about the people in Dickens, we must needs start with some understanding of what is implied when we call them true, lifelike, finely presented. Is not the fact in itself very remarkable, that by dint (it seems) of *omitting* those very features which in life most strongly impress us, an artist in fiction can produce something which we applaud as an inimitable portrait? That for disgust he can give us delight, and yet leave us glorying in his verisimilitude?

Turn to another art. Open the great volume of Hogarth, and look at the several figures of

women which present a fair correspondence with that of Mrs. Gamp. We admire the artist's observation, his great skill, his moral significance, even his grim humour; then—we close the book with a feeling of relief. With these faces who would spend hours of leisure? The thing has been supremely well done, and we are glad of it, and will praise the artist unreservedly; but his basely grinning and leering women must not hang upon the wall, to be looked at and talked of with all and sundry. Hogarth has copied—in the strict sense of the word. He gives us life—and we cannot bear it.

The Mrs. Gamp of our novel is a piece of the most delicate idealism. It is a sublimation of the essence of Gamp. No novelist (say what he will) ever gave us a picture of life which was not idealized; but there are degrees—degrees of purpose and of power. Juliet's Nurse is an idealized portrait, but it comes much nearer to the real thing than Mrs. Gamp; in our middle-class England we cannot altogether away with the free-spoken dame of Verona; we Bowdlerize her—of course damaging her in the process. Mrs. Berry, in *Richard Feverel*, is idealized, but she smacks too strongly of the truth for boudoir readers. Why, Moll Flanders herself is touched and softened, for all the author's illusive directness. In Mrs. Gamp, Dickens has done his own Bowdlerizing, but with a dexterity which serves

only to heighten his figure's effectiveness. Vulgarity he leaves; that is of the essence of the matter; vulgarity unsurpassable is the note of Mrs. Gamp. Vileness, on the other hand, becomes grotesquerie, wonderfully converted into a subject of laughter. Her speech, among the basest ever heard from human tongue, by a process of infinite subtlety, which leaves it the same yet not the same, is made an endless amusement, a source of quotation for laughing lips incapable of unclean utterance.

Idealism, then: confessed idealism. But let us take another character from another book, also a woman supposed to represent a phase of low life in London. Do you recall "good Mrs. Brown", the hag who strips little Florence Dombey of her clothes? And do you remember that this creature has a daughter, her name Alice Marlow, who—presumably having been a domestic servant, or a shop-girl, or something of the kind—was led astray by Mr. Carker of the shining teeth, and has become a wandering nondescript? Now in Alice Marlow we again have idealism; but of a different kind. This child of good Mrs. Brown, tramping into London on a bitter night, is found on the roadside and charitably taken home by Mr. Carker's sister, neither being aware of the other's identity; and having submitted to this kindness, and having accepted money, the girl goes her way. That

same night she learns who has befriended her, and forthwith rushes back (a few miles) through storm and darkness, to fling the alms at the giver. Outlines of a story sufficiently theatrical; but the dialogue! One fails to understand how Dickens brought himself to pen the language which—at great length—he puts into this puppet's mouth. It is doubtful whether one could pick out a single sentence, a single phrase, such as the real Alice Marlow could conceivably have used. Her passion is vehement; no impossible thing. The words in which she utters it would be appropriate to the most stagey of wronged heroines—be that who it may. A figure less lifelike will not be found in any novel ever written. Yet Dickens doubtless intended it as legitimate idealization; a sort of type of the doleful multitude of betrayed women. He meant it for imagination exalting common fact. But the fact is not exalted; it has simply vanished. And the imagination is of a kind that avails nothing on any theme. In Mrs. Gamp a portion of truth is omitted; in Alice Marlow there is substitution of falsity. By the former process, true idealism *may* be reached; by the latter, one arrives at nothing but attitude and sham.

Of course omission and veiling do not suffice to create Mrs. Gamp. In his alchemy, Dickens had command of the *menstruum* which alone is

powerful enough to effect such transmutation as this; it is called humour. Humour, be it remembered, is inseparable from charity. Not only did it enable him to see this coarse creature as an amusing person; it inspired him with that large tolerance which looks through things external, gives its full weight to circumstance, and preserves a modesty, a humility, in human judgment. We can form some notion of what Mrs. Gamp would have become in the hands of a rigorous realist, with scorn and disgust (inevitably implied) taking the place of humour. We reject the photograph; it avails us nothing in art or life. Humour deals gently with fact and fate; in its smile there is forbearance, in its laugh there is kindliness. With falsehood—however well meant—it is incompatible; when it has done its work as solvent, the gross adherents are dissipated, the essential truth remains. Do you ask for the Platonic *idea* of London's hired nurse early in Queen Victoria's reign? Dickens shows it you embodied. At such a thing as this, crawling between earth and heaven, what can one do but laugh? Its existence is a puzzle, a wonder. The class it represents shall be got rid of as speedily as possible; well and good; we cannot tolerate such a public nuisance. But the type shall be preserved for all time by the magic of a great writer's deep-seeing humour, and shall be known as Mrs. Gamp.

For a moment, contrast with this masterpiece a picture in which Dickens has used his idealism on material more promising, though sought amid surroundings sufficiently like those seen in the description of Kingsgate Street. The most successful character in his stories written to be read at Christmas is Mrs. Lirriper. She belongs to a class distinguished then, as now, by its uncleanness, its rapacity, its knavery, its ignorance. Mrs. Lirriper keeps a London lodging-house. Here, in depicting an individual, Dickens has not typified a class. He idealizes this woman, but finds in her, ready to his hand, the qualities of goodness and tenderness and cheery honesty, so that there is no question of transmuting a subject repulsive to the senses. Mrs. Lirriper is quite possible, even in a London lodging-house; in the flesh, however, we should not exactly seek her society. Her talk (idealized with excellent adroitness) would too often jar upon the ear; her person would be, to say the least, unattractive. In the book, she has lost these accidents of position: we are first amused, then drawn on to like, to admire, to love her. An unfortunate blemish—the ever-recurring artificiality of story—threatens to make her dim; but Mrs. Lirriper triumphs over this. We bear her in memory as a person known—a person most unhappily circumstanced, set in a gloomy sphere; but of such sweet nature that we forget her inevitable defects,

even as we should those of an actual acquaintance of like character.

In looking back on the events of life, do we not see them otherwise than, at the time, they appeared to us? The harsh is smoothed; the worst of everything is forgotten; things pleasant come into relief. This (a great argument for optimism) is a similitude of Dickens's art. Like Time, he obscures the unpleasing, emphasizes all we are glad to remember. Time does not falsify; neither does Dickens, whenever his art is unalloyed.

Let us turn to his literary method. It is that of all the great novelists. To set before his reader the image so vivid in his own mind, he simply describes and reports. We have, in general, a very precise and complete picture of externals—the face, the gesture, the habit. In this Dickens excels; he proves to us by sheer force of visible detail how distinct was the mental shape from which he drew. We learn the tone of voice, the trick of utterance; he declared that every word spoken by his characters was audible to him. Then does the man reveal himself in colloquy; sometimes once for all, sometimes by degrees, in chapter after chapter—though this is seldom the case. We know these people because we see and hear them.

In a few instances he added deliberate analysis; it was never well done, always superfluous.

Very rarely has analysis of character justified itself in fiction. To Dickens the method was alien; he could make no use whatever of it. In the early book which illustrates all his defects, *Nicholas Nickleby*, we have some dreary pages concerned with the inner man of Ralph Nickleby; seeing that the outer is but shadowy, these details cannot interest; they show, moreover, much crudity and conventionality of thought. Later, an analysis is attempted of Mr. Dombey—very laborious, very long. It does not help us in the least to understand Paul's father, himself one of the least satisfactory of Dickens's leading persons. One may surmise that the author felt something of this, and went out of his wonted way in an endeavour to give the image more life.

It results from Dickens's weakness in the devising of incident, in the planning of story, that he seldom develops character through circumstance. There are conversions, but we do not much believe in them; they smack of the stage. Possibly young Martin Chuzzlewit may be counted an exception; but there is never much life in him. From this point of view Dickens's best bit of work is Pip, in *Great Expectations*: Pip, the narrator of his own story, who exhibits very well indeed the growth of a personality, the interaction of character and event. One is not permitted to lose sight of the actual author;

though so much more living than Esther Summerson, Pip is yet embarrassed, like her, with the gift of humour. We know very well whose voice comes from behind the scenes when Pip is describing Mr. Wopsle's dramatic venture. Save for this, we acknowledge a true self-revelation. What could be better than a lad's picture of his state of mind, when, after learning that he has "great expectations", he quits the country home of his childhood and goes to London? "I formed a plan in outline for bestowing a dinner of roast beef and plum-pudding, a pint of ale, and a gallon of condescension upon everybody in the village" (chap. xix). It is one of many touches which give high value to this book.

As a rule, the more elaborate Dickens's conception of character, the smaller his success in working it out. Again and again he endeavoured to present men and women of exceptionally strong passions: the kind of persons who make such a figure on the boards, where they frown and clench their fists, and utter terrible phrases. It began in *Oliver Twist* with the man called Monk; in *Barnaby* came the murderer; in *Chuzzlewit* appears the puppet known as old Martin, a thing of sawdust. Later, the efforts in this direction are more conscientious, more laboured, but rarely more successful. An exception, perhaps, may be noted in Bradley Headstone, the

lover of Lizzie Hexam, whose consuming passion here and there convinces, all the more for its well-contrived contrast with the character of the man whom Lizzie prefers. Charley Hexam, too, is lifelike, on a lower plane. The popular voice pleads for Sydney Carton; yes, he is well presented—but so easy to forget. Think, on the other hand, of the long list of women meant to be tragic, who, one and all, must be judged failures. Edith Dombey, with her silent wrath and ludicrous behaviour, who, intended for a strong, scornful nature, dumbly goes to the sacrifice when bidden by her foolish mother, and then rails at the old worldling for the miseries needlessly brought upon herself. Rosa Dartle, at first a promising suggestion, but falling away into exaggerations of limelight frenzy. Lady Dedlock and her maid Hortense—which is the more obvious waxwork? Mrs. Clennam, in *Little Dorrit*, is wrought so patiently and placed in so picturesque a scene that one laments over her impossibility; her so-called talk is, perhaps, less readable than anything in Dickens. The same book shows us, or aims at showing us, Miss Wade and Tattycoram, from both of whom we turn incredulous. Of Miss Havisham one grudges to speak; her ghostly presence does its best to spoil an admirable novel. Women, all these, only in name; a cause of grief to the lovers of the master, a

matter of scoffing to his idler critics. When we come to women of everyday stature, then indeed it is a different thing. So numerous are these, and so important in an estimate of Dickens's power of characterization, that I must give them a chapter to themselves.

Neither at a black-hearted villain was he really good, though he prided himself on his achievements in this kind. Jonas Chuzzlewit is the earliest worth mention; and what can be said of Jonas, save that he is a surly ruffian of whom one knows very little? The "setting" of his part is very strong; much powerful writing goes to narrate his history; but the man remains mechanical. Mr. Carker hardly aims at such completeness of scoundreldom, but he would be a fierce rascal—if not so bent on exhibiting his teeth, which remind one of the working wires. Other shapes hover in lurid vagueness. Whether, last of all, John Jasper would have shown a great advance, must remain doubtful. The first half of *Edwin Drood* shows him picturesquely, and little more. We discover no hint of real tragedy. The man seems to us a very vulgar assassin, and we care not at all what becomes of him.

Against these set the gallery of portraits in which Dickens has displayed to us the legal world of his day. Here he painted from nature, and with an artist's love of his subject. From the attorneys and barristers of *Pickwick*, sportive

themselves and a cause of infinite mirth in others, to the Old Bailey practitioners so admirably grim in *Great Expectations*, one's eye passes along a row of masterpieces. Nay, it is idle to use the pictorial simile; here are men with blood in their veins—some of them with a good deal of it on their hands. They will not be forgotten; whether we watch the light comedy of Jorkins and Spenlow, or observe the grim gravity of Mr. Jaggers, it is with the same entire conviction. In this department of his work Dickens can be said to idealize only in the sense of the finest art; no praise can exaggerate his dexterity in setting forth these examples of supreme realism. As a picture of actual life in a certain small world *Bleak House* is his greatest book; from office-boy to judge, here are all who walk in "the valley of the shadow of the Law". Impossible to run through the list, much as one would enjoy it. Think only of Mr. Vholes. In the whole range of fiction there is no character more vivid than this; exhibited so briefly yet so completely, with such rightness in every touch, such impressiveness of total effect, that the thing becomes a miracle. No strain of improbable intrigue can threaten the vitality of these dusty figures. The clerks are as much alive as their employers; the law-stationer stands for ever face to face with Mr. Tulkinghorn; Inspector Bucket has warmer flesh than that of any other detective in the

library of detective literature. As for Jaggers and Wemmick, we should presume them unsurpassable had we not known their predecessors. They would make a novelist's reputation.

Among the finest examples of characterization (I postpone a review of the figures which belong more distinctly to satire) must be mentioned the Father of the Marshalsea. Should ever proof be demanded—as often it has been—that Dickens is capable of high comedy, let it be sought in the 31st chapter of book i of *Little Dorrit*. There will be seen the old Marshalsea prisoner, the bankrupt of half a lifetime, entertaining and patronizing his workhouse pensioner, old Mr. Nandy. For delicacy of treatment, for fineness of observation, this scene, I am inclined to think, is unequalled in all the novels. Of exaggeration there is no trace; nothing raises a laugh; at most one smiles, and may very likely be kept grave by profound interest and a certain emotion of wonder. We are in a debtors' prison, among vulgar folk; yet the exquisite finish of this study of human nature forbids one to judge it by any but the highest standards. The Dorrit brothers are both well drawn; they are characterizations in the best sense of the word; and in this scene we have the culmination of the author's genius. That it reveals itself so quietly is but the final assurance of consummate power.

With the normal in character, with what (all

things considered) we may call wholesome normality, Dickens does not often concern himself. Of course there are his homely-minded "little women", of whom more in another place. And there are his benevolent old boys (I call them so advisedly) whom one would like to be able to class with everyday people, but who cannot in strictness be considered here. Walking-gentlemen appear often enough; amiable shadows, such as Tom Pinch's friend Westlock; figures meant to be prominent, such as Arthur Clennam. There remain a few instances of genuine characterization within ordinary limits. I cannot fall in with the common judgment that Dickens never shows us a gentleman. Twice, certainly, he has done so, with the interesting distinction that in one case he depicts a gentleman of the old school; in the other, a representative of the refined manhood which came into existence (or became commonly observable) in his latter years. In John Jarndyce I can detect no vulgarity; he appears to me compact of good sense, honour, and gentle feeling. His eccentricity does not pass bounds; the better we know him the less observable it grows. Though we are told nothing expressly of his intellectual acquirements, it is plain that he had a liberal education, and that his tastes are studious. Impossible not to like and to respect Mr. Jarndyce. Compare him with Mr. Pickwick, or with the Cheerybles, and

we see at once the author's indication of social superiority, no less than his increased skill in portraiture. The second figure, belonging to a changed time, is Mr. Crisparkle, for whose sake especially one regrets the unfinished state of *Edwin Drood*. His breezy manner, his athletic habits, his pleasant speech, give no bad idea of the classical tutor who is neither an upstart nor a pedant. Dickens was careful in his choice of names; we see how he formed that of Crisparkle, and recognize its fitness.

Two other names occur to me, which carry with them a suggestion of true gentility—if the word be permitted; but their bearers can hardly rank with normal personages. Sir Leicester Dedlock, though by no means unsympathetically presented, belongs rather to the region of satire; he is a gentleman, indeed, and meant to be representative of a class, but his special characteristic overcharges the portrait. Incomparably more of a human being than his wife, he might, with less satirical emphasis, have been a very true gentleman indeed. Then, in *Dombey and Son*, does one not remember Cousin Feenix? The name, this time, is unfortunate; this weak-legged scion of aristocracy deserved better treatment. For he is no phantasm; has no part with the puppets of supposed high-birth whom Dickens occasionally set up only for the pleasure of knocking them down again. However inca-

pable of walking straight across a room, however restricted in his views of life, Cousin Feenix has the instincts of birth and breeding. I think one may say that he is Dickens's least disputable success in a sketch (it is only a sketch) from the aristocratic world. His talk does not seem to me exaggerated, and it is unusually interesting; his heart is right, his apprehensions are delicate. That he should be shown as feeble in mind, no less than at the knees, is merely part of the author's scheme; and, after all, the feebleness is more apparent than real. Dickens, moreover, very often associates kindness of disposition with lack of brains; it connects itself, I fancy, with his attitude towards liberal education, which has already been discussed, as well as with his Radicalism, still to be spoken of. No distinctly intellectual person figures in his books; David Copperfield is only a seeming exception, for who really thinks of David as a literary man? To his autobiography let all praise be given—with the reserve that we see the man himself less clearly than any other person of whom he speaks. Decidedly he is *not* "the hero of his own story". Had Dickens intended to show us a man of letters, he would here have failed most grievously; of course he aimed at no such thing; the attempt would have cost him half his public. And so it is that one never thinks of the good David as a character at all, never for a moment credits *him*,

the long-suffering youth for whom Dora "held the pens", with that glorious endowment of genius which went to the writing of his life.

Of an average middle-class family in Dickens's earlier time — decent, kindly, not unintelligent folk—we have the best example in the Meagles group, from *Little Dorrit*. This household may be contrasted with, say, that of the Maylies in *Oliver Twist*, which is merely immature work, and with the more familiar family circles on which Dickens lavishes his mirth and his benevolence. The Meagles do not much interest us, which is quite right; they are thoroughly realized, and take their place in social history. Well done, too, is the Pocket family in *Great Expectations*, an interesting pendant to that of the Jellybys in *Bleak House*; showing how well, when he chose, Dickens could satirize without extravagance. Mrs. Pocket is decidedly more credible than Mrs. Jellyby; it might be urged, perhaps, that she belongs to the Sixties instead of to the Fifties, a point of some importance. The likeness in dissimilitude between these ladies' husbands is very instructive. As for the son, Herbert Pocket, he is a capital specimen of the healthy, right-minded, and fairly-educated middle-class youth. Very skilfully indeed is he placed side by side with Pip; each throwing into relief the other's natural and acquired characteristics. We see how long it will take the blacksmith's

foster-child (he telling the tale himself) to reach the point of mental and moral refinement to which Herbert Pocket has been bred.

One more illustration of the ordinary in life and character. Evidently Dickens took much pains with Walter Gay, in *Dombey and Son*, meaning to represent an average middle-class boy, high-spirited, frank, affectionate, and full of cheerful ambition. I have already mentioned the darker design, so quickly abandoned; we feel sure its working out would not have carried conviction, for Walter Gay, from the first, does not ring quite true. The note seems forced; we are not stirred by the lad's exuberance of jollity, and he never for a moment awakens strong interest. Is it any better with Richard Carstone,—in whom the tragic idea was, with modification, carried through? Yes, Richard is more interesting; by necessity of his fortunes, and by virtue of artistic effort. He has his place in a book pervaded with the atmosphere of doom. Vivid he never becomes; we see him as a passive victim of fate, rather than as a struggling man; if he made a better fight, or if we were allowed to see more of his human weakness (partly forbidden by our proprieties), his destiny would affect us more than it does. In truth, this kind of thing cannot be done under Dickens's restrictions. Thackeray *could* have done it magnificently; but there was "the great, big, stupid public".

The "gentleman" Dickens loved to contemplate was—in echo of Burns's phrase—he who derives his patent of gentility straight from Almighty God. These he found abundantly among the humble of estate, the poor in spirit; or indulged his fine humanity in the belief that they abounded. A broken squire, reduced to miserly service, but keeping through all faults and misfortunes the better part of his honest and kindly nature; grotesque in person, of fantastic demeanour, but always lovable;—of this dream comes Newman Noggs. A city clerk, grey in conscientious labour for one house, glorying in the perfection of his ledger, taking it ill if his employers insist on raising his salary;—the vision is christened Tim Linkinwater. A young man of bumpkinish appearance, shy, ungainly, who has somehow drifted into the household of a country architect; who nourishes his soul at the church organ; who is so good and simple and reverential that years of experience cannot teach him what everyone else sees at a glance—the hypocritical rascality of his master: he takes shape, and is known to us as Tom Pinch. A village blacksmith, with heart as tender as his thews are tough; delighting above all things in the society of a little child; so dull of brain that he gives up in despair the effort to learn his alphabet; so sweet of temper that he endures in silence the nagging of an outrageous wife; so delicate of sensibility that he perspires at

the thought of seeming to intrude upon an old friend risen in life;—what name can be his but Joe Gargery? These, and many another like unto them, did the master lovingly create, and there would be something of sacrilege in a cold scrutiny of his work. Whether or no their prototypes existed in the hurrying crowd of English life, which obscures so much good as well as evil, these figures have fixed themselves in the English imagination, and their names are part of our language. Dickens saw them, and heard them speak; to us, when we choose to enjoy without criticising, they seem no less present. Every such creation was a good deed; the results for good have been incalculable. Would he have been better occupied, had he pried into each character, revealed its vices, insisted on its sordid weaknesses, thrown bare its frequent hypocrisy, and emphasized its dreary unintelligence? Indeed, I think not. I will only permit myself the regret that he who could come so near to truth, and yet so move the affections, as in Joe Gargery, was at other times content with that inferior idealism which addresses itself only to unripe minds or to transitory moods.

The point to be kept in view regarding these ideal figures is that, however little their speech or conduct may smack of earth, their worldly surroundings are shown with marvellous fidelity. Tom Pinch worshipping at the shrine of Pecksniff

may not hold our attention; but Tom Pinch walking towards Salisbury on the frosty road, or going to market in London with his sister, is unforgettable. This is what makes the difference between an impossible person in Dickens and the same kind of vision in the work of smaller writers. One cannot repeat too often that, in our literary slang, he "visualized" every character—Little Nell no less than Mr. Jaggers. Seeing *them*, he saw the house in which they lived, the table at which they ate, and all the little habits of their day-to-day life. Here is an invaluable method of illusion, if an author can adopt it. Thus fortified, Dickens's least substantial imaginings have a durability not to be hoped for the laborious accuracies of an artist uninspired.

Pass to another group in this scarcely exhaustible world—the confessed eccentrics. Here Dickens revels. An English novelist must needs be occupied to some extent with grotesque abnormalities of thought and demeanour. Dickens saw them about him even more commonly than we of to-day, and delighted in noting, selecting, combining. The result is seen in those persons of his drama who are frankly given up by many who will defend his verisimilitude in other directions. Mantalini, for example; Quilp, Captain Cuttle, Silas Wegg, and many another. For Silas Wegg, I fear, nothing can be urged, save the trifle that we know him; he becomes a bore,

one of the worst instances of this form of humour weakened by extenuation. Even Dickens occasionally suffered from the necessity of filling a certain space. Think how long his novels are, and marvel that the difficulty does not more often declare itself. Of Mr. Boythorn we are accustomed to think as drawn from Landor, but then it is Landor with all the intellect left out; his roaring as gently as any sucking-dove does not greatly charm us, but his talk has good qualities. More of a character, in the proper sense of the word, is Harold Skimpole, whose portrait gave such offence to Leigh Hunt. Now Skimpole is one of the few people in Dickens whom we dislike, and so, *a priori*, demands attention. If we incline to think his eccentricity overdone, be it remembered that the man was in part an actor, and a very clever actor too. Skimpole is excellent work, and stands out with fine individuality in contrast to the representatives of true unworldliness.

To which category belongs Mr. Micawber? The art of living without an income may be successfully cultivated in very different moods. It is possible for a man of the most generous instincts to achieve great things in this line of endeavour; but the fact remains that, sooner or later, somebody has the honour of discharging his liabilities. To speak severely of Mr. Micawber is beyond the power of the most con-

scientious critic, whether in life or art; the most rigid economist would be glad to grasp him by the hand and to pay for the bowl of punch over which this type of genial impecuniosity would dilate upon his embarrassments and his hopes; the least compromising realist has but to open at a dialogue or a letter in which Mr. Micawber's name is seen, and straightway he forgets his theories. No selfish intention can be attributed to him. His bill might *not* be provided for when he declared it *was*, and, in consequence, poor Traddles may lose the table he has purchased for "the dearest girl in the world", but Mr. Micawber had all the time been firmly assured that something would turn up; he will sympathize profoundly with Traddles, and write him an epistle which makes amends for the loss of many tables. No man ever lived who was so consistently delightful—certainly Dickens's father cannot have been so, but in this idealized portraiture we have essential truth. Men of this stamp do not abound, but they are met with, even to-day. As a rule, he who waits for something to turn up, mixing punch the while, does so with a very keen eye on his neighbour's pocket, and is recommended to us neither by Skimpole's fantastic gaiety nor by Micawber's eloquence and warmth of heart; nevertheless, one knows the irrepressibly hopeful man, full of kindliness, often distinguished by unconscious affectations of

speech, who goes through life an unreluctant pensioner on the friends won by his many good and genial qualities. The one point on which experience gives no support to the imaginative figure is his conversion to practical activity. Mr. Micawber in Australia does the heart good; but he is a pious vision. We refuse to think of a wife worn out by anxieties, of children growing up in squalor; we gladly accept the flourishing colonist; but this is tribute to the author whom we love. Dickens never wrought more successfully for our pleasure and for his own fame. He is ever at his best when dealing with an amiable weakness. And in Micawber he gives us no purely national type; such men are peculiar to no country; all the characteristics of this wonderful picture can be appreciated by civilized readers throughout the world. It is not so in regard to many of his creations, though all the finest have traits of universal humanity. Should time deal hardly with him, should his emphasis of time and place begin to weigh against his wide acceptance, it is difficult to believe that the beaming visage of Wilkins Micawber will not continue to be recognized wherever men care for literary art.

This chapter must conclude with a glance at a class of human beings prominent in Dickens's earlier books, but of small artistic interest when treated in the manner peculiar to him. He was fond of characters hovering between eccentricity

and madness, and in one case he depicted what he himself calls an idiot, though idiocy is not strictly speaking the form of disease exhibited. Lunatics were more often found at large in his day than in ours; perhaps that accounts for our introduction to such persons as Mrs. Nickleby's wooer and Mr. Dick; Miss Flite, of course, had another significance. The crazy gentleman on the garden walk, who at once flatters and terrifies Mrs. Nickleby, can hardly be regarded as anything but an actor in broad farce; his talk, indeed, is midsummer madness, but is meant only to raise a laugh. In the new century, one does not laugh with such agreeable facility. Mrs. Nickleby commands our attention—at a respectful distance; and here, as always, behaves after her kind, illustrating the eternal feminine; but the madman we cannot accept. Betsy Trotwood's *protégé* comes nearer to the recognizable; nevertheless Mr. Dick's presence in such a book as *David Copperfield* would seem waste of space, but for certain considerations. He illustrates the formidable lady's goodness and common-sense; he served a very practical purpose, that of recommending rational treatment of the insane; and he had his place in the pages of an author whose humanity includes all that are in any way afflicted, in mind, body, or estate. Moreover, the craze about King Charles's head has been, and is likely to be, a great resource to literary persons in

search of a familiar allusion. In passing to *Barnaby Rudge*, we are on different ground. Whatever else, Barnaby is a very picturesque figure, and I presume it was merely on this account that Dickens selected such a hero. In an earlier chapter, I said that this story seemed to me to bear traces of the influence of Scott; its narrative style and certain dialogues in the historical part are suggestive of this. May not the crazy Barnaby have originated in a recollection of Madge Wildfire? Crazy, I call him; an idiot he certainly is not. An idiot does not live a life of exalted imagination. But certain lunatics are of imagination all compact, and Barnaby, poetically speaking, makes a good representative of the class. Of psychology—a word unknown to Dickens—we, of course, have nothing; to ask for it is out of place. The idea, all things considered, cannot be judged a happy one. Whilst writing the latter part of the book Dickens thought for a moment of showing the rioters as led by a commanding figure, who, in the end, should prove to have escaped from Bedlam. We see his motive for this, but are not sorry he abandoned the idea. Probably *Barnaby Rudge*, good as it is, would have been still better had the suggestion of a half-witted central figure been also discarded.

CHAPTER VI

SATIRIC PORTRAITURE

Not only does Dickens give poetic shape to the better characteristics of English life; he is also England's satirist. Often directed against abuses in their nature temporary, his satire has in some part lost its edge, and would have only historic interest but for the great preservative, humour, mingled with all his books; much of it, however, is of enduring significance, and reminds us that the graver faults of Englishmen are not to be overcome by a few years of popular education, by general increase of comfort and refinement, by the spread of a democratic spirit. Some of these blemishes, it is true, belong more or less to all mankind; but in Dickens's England they were peculiarly disfiguring, and the worst of them seem inseparable from the national character.

Much as they loved and glorified him, his countrymen did not fail to make protest when wounded by the force of his satiric portraiture. The cry was "exaggeration". Naturally, this protest was very loud during the publication of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which book a vice supposed to be peculiarly English was vigorously dealt with. Dickens used the opportunity of a

preface to answer his critics; he remarked that peculiarities of character often escape observation until they are directly pointed out, and asked whether the charge of exaggeration brought against him might not simply mean that he, a professed student of life, saw more than ordinary people. There was undoubted truth in the plea; Browning has put the same thought—as an apology for art—into the mouth of Fra Lippo Lippi. Dickens assuredly saw a great deal more in every day of his life than his average readers in threescore years and ten. But it still remained a question whether, in his desire to stigmatize an objectionable peculiarity, the satirist had not erred by making this peculiarity the whole man. Exaggeration there was, beyond dispute, in such a picture as that of Pecksniff, inasmuch as no man can be so consistently illustrative of an evil habit of mind. There was lack of proportion; the figure failed in human symmetry. Just as, in the same book, the pictures of American life erred through one-sidedness. Dickens had written satire, and satire as pointed, as effective, as any in literature. Let the galled jade wince; there was an outcry of many voices, appealing to common judgment. It might be noted that these same sensitive critics had never objected to "exaggeration" when the point at issue was merely one of art; they became aware of their favourite author's

defect only when it involved a question of morals or of national character.

Merely as satirist, however, Dickens never for a moment endangered his popularity. The fact, already noticed, that *Martin Chuzzlewit* found fewer admirers than the books preceding it, had nothing to do with its moral theme, but must be traced to causes, generally more or less vague, such as from time to time affect the reception of every author's work; not long after its completion, this book became one of the most widely read. There is the satire which leaves cold, or alienates, the ordinary man, either because it passes above his head, or conflicts with his cherished prejudices; and there is the satire which, by appealing to his better self,—that is, to a standard of morality which he theoretically, or in very deed, accepts,—commands his sympathy as soon as he sees its drift. What is called the "popular conscience" was on Dickens's side; and he had the immense advantage of being able to raise a hearty laugh even whilst pointing his lesson. Among the rarest of things is this thorough understanding between author and public, permitting a man of genius to say aloud with impunity that which all his hearers say within themselves dumbly, inarticulately. Dickens never went too far; never struck at a genuine conviction of the multitude. Let us imagine him, in some moment of aberration, suggesting

criticism of the popular idea of sexual morality! Would it have availed him that he had done the state some service? Would argument or authority have helped for one moment to win him a patient hearing? We know that he never desired to provoke such antagonism. Broadly speaking, he was one with his readers, and therein lay his strength for reform.

As for the charge of exaggeration, the truth is that Dickens exaggerated no whit more in his satire than in his sympathetic portraiture. It is an idle objection. Of course he exaggerated, in all but every page. In the last chapter I pointed to exceptional instances of literal or subdued truthfulness; not by these did he achieve his triumphs; they lurk for discovery by the curious. Granting his idealistic method, such censure falls wide of the mark. We are struck more forcibly when a character is exhibited as compact of knavery or grotesque cruelty, than when it presents incarnate goodness; that is all. The one question we are justified in urging is, whether his characterization is consistent with itself. In the great majority of cases, I believe the answer must be affirmative. Were it not so, Dickens's reputation would by this time linger only among the untaught; among those who are content to laugh, no matter how the mirth be raised.

His satire covers a great part of English life, public and private. Education, charity, religion,

social morality in its broadest sense, society in its narrowest; legal procedure, the machinery of politics, and the forms of government. Licensed to speak his mind, he aims laughingly or sternly, but always in the same admirable spirit, at every glaring abuse of the day. He devotes a whole book, a prodigy of skilful labour, to that crowning example of the law's delay, which had wrought ruin in innumerable homes; he throws off a brilliant little sketch, in a Christmas number, and makes everybody laugh at the absurd defects of railway refreshment-rooms. We marvel at such breadth of untiring observation in the service of human welfare. Impossible to follow him through all the achievements of his satire; I can but select examples in each field, proceeding in the order just indicated.

It is natural that he should turn, at the beginning of his career, to abuses evident in the parish, the school, the place of worship. These were nearest at hand; they stared at him in his observant childhood, and during his life as a journalist. Consequently we soon meet with Mr. Bumble, with Mr. Squeers, with the Rev. Mr. Stiggins. Of these three figures, the one most open to the charge of exaggeration is the Yorkshire schoolmaster; yet who shall declare with assurance that Squeers's brutality outdoes the probable in his place and generation? There is crude workmanship in the portrait, and still

more in the picture of Dotheboys, where overcharging defeats its own end. The extraordinary feature of this bit of work is the inextricable blending of horror and jocosity. Later, when Dickens had fuller command of his resources, he would have made Dotheboys very much more impressive; it remains an illustration of superabundant spirits in a man of genius. We can hardly help an amiable feeling towards the Squeers family, seeing the hearty gusto with which they pursue their monstrous business. The children who suffer under them are so shadowy that we cannot feel the wrong as we ought; such a spectacle should lay waste the heart, and yet we continue smiling. Dickens, of course, did not intend that this gathering of martyred children should have the effect of reality. Enough if he called attention to the existence of a monstrous state of things; reflection shall come afterwards; his immediate business is story-telling, that is to say, amusement. Wonderfully did he adapt means to ends; we find, in fact, that nothing could have been practically more effectual than this exhibition of strange gaiety. Mr. Bumble, though he comes earlier, is, in truth, better work than Squeers. Read carefully chapter iv of *Oliver Twist*, and you will discover, probably to your surprise, that the "porochial" functionary is, after all, human: in one line—in a delicate touch—we are shown

Bumble softened, to the point of a brief silence, by Oliver's pleading for kind usage. No such moment occurs in the history of Squeers. And we see why not. The master of Dotheboys is not meant for a conscientious study of a human being; he is merely the representative of a vile institution. Admit a lurking humanity, and we have suggestion of possible reform. Now the parochial system, bad as it was, seemed a necessity, and only needed a thorough overhauling,—observe the perfectly human behaviour of certain of the guardians before whom Oliver appears; but with the Yorkshire schools, it was root and branch, they must be swept from the earth. I do not think this is refining overmuch; Dickens's genius declared itself so consistently in his adaptation of literary means to ends of various kinds; and, however immature the details of his performance, he shows from the first this marvellous precision in effect.

Dotheboys was of course, even in these bad times, an exceptional method for the rearing of youth. It is not cold-blooded cruelty, but blockheaded ignorance, against which Dickens has to fight over the whole ground of education. We have noticed his attitude towards the system of classical training; the genteel private schools of his day invited satire, and supplied him with some of his most entertaining chapters. Dr. Blimber's establishment is a favourable specimen of the kind

of thing that satisfied well-to-do parents; genial ridicule suffices for its condemnation. But Dickens went deeper and laid stress upon the initial stages of the absurd system. Mrs. Pipchin, however distinct a personality, was not singular in her mode of dealing with children fresh from the nursery. Always profoundly interested in these little people, Dickens, without reaching any very clear conception of reform, well understood the evil consequences of such gross neglect or mistaken zeal as were common in households of every class. He knew that the vices of society could for the most part be traced to these bad beginnings. A leader in this as in so many other directions, he taught his readers to think much of children just at the time when England had especial need of an educational awakening. Not his satire alone, but his so-called sentimentality, served a great purpose, and the death-bed of Paul Dombey, no less than the sufferings of Mr. Creakle's little victim, helped on the better day.

Though it has been "proved to demonstration" —by persons who care for such proof—that tenderness of heart led him astray in his bitterness against the new Poor Law, we see, of course, that herein he pursued his humane task, seeking in all possible ways to mitigate the harshness of institutions which pressed hardly upon the poor and weak. He could not away with those who held—or spoke as if they held—that a man had

no duty to his fellows beyond the strict letter of the law. In this respect that very poor book, *Hard Times*, has noteworthy significance; but the figures of Gradgrind and Bounderby show how completely he could fail when he dispensed (or all but dispensed) with the aid of humour. Oliver Twist's "old gentleman in the white waistcoat" is decidedly better as portraiture, and as satire more effective. Apologists, or rampant glorifiers, of the workhouse, such as appear in the Christmas Books, need not be viewed too seriously; they stood forth at a season of none too refined joviality, and were in keeping with barons of beef, tons of plum-pudding, and other such heavy extravagances. They do not live in one's mind; nor, I think, does any one of Dickens's persons who are meant to satirize poor-law abuses. In this matter, his spirit did its work, his art not greatly assisting.

But when we come to his lashings of religious hypocrisy, the figures castigated are substantial enough. Always delighted to present a humbug, Dickens can scarce restrain himself when he gets hold of a religious humbug, especially of the coarse type. Brother Stiggins shines immortal in the same pages with Mr. Pickwick and the Wellers. Compare with him the Reverend Mr. Chadband. They are the same men, but one lived in 1837, the other in 1853. Brother Stiggins is, in plain English, a drunkard; Mr. Chadband

would think shame of himself to be even once overtaken: he is a consumer of tea and muffins. It suited the author's mood, and the day in which he was writing, to have Mr. Stiggins soundly beaten in a pugilistic encounter with Tony Weller, to say nothing of other undignified positions in which the reverend gentleman finds himself; but Mr. Chadband may discourse upon "Terewth" in Mr. Snagsby's parlour to any length that pleases him with no fear of such outrage. These same discourses are among the most mirth-provoking things in all Dickens: impossible to regard with nothing but contempt or dislike the man who has so shaken our sides. It might be well for the world if the race of Chadband should disappear (a consummation still far out of sight); but the satirist frankly glories in him, and to us he is a joy for ever. This is the best of the full-length pictures; but we have many a glimpse of kindred personages, always shown us with infinite gusto. The Rev. Melchisedech Howler, for instance. With what extravagance of humour, with what a rapture of robust mirth, are his characteristics touched off in a short passage of *Dombey and Son*! I must give myself the pleasure of copying it. "The Rev. Melchisedech Howler, who, having been one day discharged from the West India Docks on a false suspicion (got up expressly against him by the general enemy) of screwing

gimlets into puncheons, and applying his lips to the orifice, had announced the destruction of the world for that day two years, at ten in the morning, and opened a front parlour for the reception of ladies and gentlemen, of the ranting persuasion, upon whom, on the first occasion of their assemblage, the admonition of the Rev. Melchisedech had produced so powerful an effect, that, in their rapturous performance of a sacred jig, which closed the service, the whole flock broke through into a kitchen below and disabled a mangle belonging to one of the fold" (chap. xv). There is a sheer boyishness in this irresistible glee; yet the passage was written more than ten years after *Pickwick*. It is the same all but to the end. Dickens treats a thoroughgoing humbug as though he loved him. Reverent of all true religion, and inclined to bitterness against respectable shortcomings in the high places of the Church, he goes wild with merriment over back-parlour proselytism and the brayings of Little Bethel. Perhaps in this respect alone did he give grave and lasting offence to numbers of people who would otherwise have been amongst his admirers. At a later time, he could draw, or attempt, a sympathetic portrait of a clergyman of the Established Church, in *Our Mutual Friend*, and, in his last book, could speak respectfully of Canons; but with Dissent he never reconciled himself. To this day, I believe, his

books are excluded, on religious grounds, from certain families holding austere views. Remembering the England he sets before us, it is perhaps the highest testimony to his power that such hostility did not make itself more felt when he was mocking so light-heartedly at Stiggins and Chadband and the Rev. Melchisedech.

Connected with hypocrisy in religion, but very skilfully kept apart from it, is his finest satiric portrait, that of Mr. Pecksniff. Think of all that is suggested in this representative of an odious vice, and marvel at the adroitness with which a hundred pitfalls of the incautious satirist are successfully avoided. A moral hypocrite, an incarnation of middle-class respectability in the worst sense of the word, in the sense so loathed by Carlyle, and by every other man of brains then living; yet never a hint at subjects forbidden in the family circle, never a word to which that relative of Mr. Pecksniff, the famous Podsnap, could possibly object. The thing would seem impossible, but that it is done. Let the understanding read between the lines; as in all great art, much is implied that finds no direct expression. Mr. Pecksniff walks and talks before us, a cause of hilarity to old and young, yet the type of as ugly a failing as any class or people can be afflicted withal. The book in which he figures is directed against self-interest in all its forms. We see the sagacious swindler, and the

greedy dupe whose unscrupulousness ends in murder. We see the flocking of the Chuzzlewit family, like birds of prey, about the sick-bed of their wealthy relative; and among them the gentlemanly architect of unctuous phrase, who, hearing himself called a hypocrite, signalizes his pre-eminence in an immortal remark: "Charity, my dear, when I take my chamber-candlestick to-night, remind me to be more than usually particular in praying for Mr. Anthony Chuzzlewit, who has done me an injustice". This man is another than Tartufe; he belongs to a different age, and different country. His religion is not an end in itself; he does not desire to be thought a saint; his prayers are inseparable from the chamber-candlestick, a mere item in the character of British respectability. A like subordination appears in the piety of all Dickens's religious pretenders; their language never becomes offensive to the ordinary reader, simply because it avoids the use of sacred names and phrases, and is seen to have a purely temporal application. Mr. Chadband is a tradesman, dealing in a species of exhortation which his hearers have agreed to call spiritual, and to rate at a certain value in coin of the realm; religion in its true sense never comes into question. Mr. Pecksniff, of course, might have become a shining light in some great conventicle, but destiny has made him a layman; he published

his habit of praying, because to pray (over the chamber-candlestick) was incumbent upon an Englishman who had a position to support, who had a stake in the country. A reputation for piety, however, would not suffice to his self-respect, and to the needs of his business; he adds an all-embracing benevolence, his smile falls like the blessed sunshine on all who meet him in his daily walk. This it is which so impresses the simple-minded Tom Pinch. Tom, a thorough Englishman for all his virtues, would not be attracted by a show of merely religious exaltation; faith must be translated into works. Pecksniff must seem to him good, kind, generous, a great man at his profession, sound and trustworthy in all he undertakes. In other words, the Pecksniff whom Tom believes in is the type of English excellence, and evidently no bad type to be set before a nation. Such men existed, and do, and will; we talk little about them, and it is their last desire that we should; they live, mostly in silence, for the honour of their race and of humankind. But, since the Puritan revolution, it has unhappily seemed necessary to our countrymen in general to profess in a peculiar way certain peculiar forms of godliness, and this habit, gradually associated with social prejudices arising from high prosperity, results in the respectable man. Analysing this person down to his elements, Carlyle found it an essen-

tial, if not *the* essential, that he should "keep a gig". Mr. Pecksniff's gig, one remembers, was no very imposing vehicle; it looked "like a gig with a tumour". "Let us be moral", says the great man (happening at that moment to be drunk); and here we get to the honest root of the matter. Though the Englishman may dispense with a gig and remain respectable, he must not be suspected of immorality. "Let us contemplate existence", pursues the inebriate sage. We do so, we English, and find that the term morality (more decidedly than religion) includes all that, in our souls, we rate most highly. According to his recognized morality (sexual first and foremost), do we put trust in a man. We are a practical people; we point to our wealth in evidence; and our experience has set it beyond doubt that chastity of thought and act is a nation's prime safeguard.

Could we but be satisfied with the conviction, and simply act upon it! It is not enough. We must hold it as an article of faith that respectability not only does not err, but knows not temptation. A poet who never asked to be thought respectable has put into words we shall not easily forget his thought about immorality:

> "I waive the quantum o' the sin,
> The hazard of concealing;
> But och! it hardens a' within,
> And petrifies the feeling!"

The quantum of the sin is so grave, the hazard of concealing so momentous, in English eyes, that we form a national conspiracy to exhibit English nature as distinct, in several points, from the merely human. Hence a characteristic delicacy, a singular refinement, resulting at its best in very sweet and noble lives; hence, also, that counterbalancing vice which would fain atone for vice in the more usual sense of the word. Though all within may be hopelessly hardened, the feeling petrified into a little idol of egoism, outwardly there shall be a show of everything we respect. "Homage to virtue", quotha? Well and good, were it nothing more. But Mr. Pecksniff takes up his parable, his innumerable kindred hold forth in the market-place. Respectability cannot hold its tongue, in fact; and the language it affects is wont to be nauseous.

Lower than Pecksniff, but of obvious brotherhood with him, stands Uriah Heep. This example of a low-born man, who, chancing to have brains, deems it most expedient to use them for dishonest purposes, will not yield in the essentials of respectability to the best in the land. He is poor, he is 'umble, but his morals must not for a moment be doubted. The undisguisable fact of poverty is accepted and made the most of; it becomes his tower of strength. Mr. Pecksniff, conscious of a well-filled purse, assumes a certain

modesty of demeanour—a foretaste, by the by, of that affectation in rich people which promises such an opportunity for satire in our own day. Uriah Heep wallows in perpetual humility; he grovels before his social superiors, that he may prove to them his equality in soul. With regard to this slimy personage, we note at once that he is a victim of circumstances, the outcome of a bad education and of a society affected with disease. His like abounded at the time; nowadays they will not so easily be discovered. The doctrine that "A man 's a man for a' that" has taken solid shape, and our triumphant democracy will soon be ashamed of a motto so disparaging. But Heep saw no prospect when he stood upright; only when he crawled did a chance of issue from that too humble life present itself. "Remember your place!"—from his earliest years this admonition had sounded for him. This prime duty is ever present to his mind; it prompts him to avow, in and out of season, that he belongs to a very 'umble family, that he is himself the 'umblest of mortals. Meanwhile the man's vitals are consumed with envy, hatred, and malice. He cannot respect himself; his training has made the thing impossible; and all men are his enemies. When he is detected in criminal proceedings we are hard upon him, very hard. Dickens cannot relent to this victim of all that is worst in the society he criticises. Had Uriah

stopped short of crime, something might have been said for him, but the fellow is fatally logical. Logic of that kind we cannot hear of for a moment; in our own logic of the police-court and the assizes we will take remarkably good care that there is no flaw.

Pecksniff and Uriah have a certain amount of intellect. In his last book Dickens presents us with the monumental humbug who is at the same time an egregious fool. Mr. Sapsea very honestly worships himself; he is respectability weighing a good many stone, with heavy watch-guard and expensive tailoring. By incessant lauding of his own virtues to a world always more or less attentive when such a speaker carries social weight, Sapsea has developed a mania of self-importance. His thickness of hide, his stolidity, are well displayed, but it seems to me that in this case Dickens has been guilty of a piece of exaggeration altogether exceeding the limits of art; perhaps the one instance where his illusion fails to make us accept an extravagance even for a moment. I refer to Sapsea's inscription for his wife's tomb (*Edwin Drood*, chap. iv). Contrasting this with anything to be found in Pecksniff or Uriah Heep, we perceive the limits of his satire, strictly imposed by art, even where he is commonly held to have been most fantastic.

Dickens applied with extraordinary skill the only method which, granted all his genius, could

have ensured him so vast a sway over the public of that time. His art, especially as satirist, lies in the judicious use of emphasis and iteration. Emphasis alone would not have answered his purpose; the striking thing must be said over and over again till the most stupid hearer has it by heart. We of to-day sometimes congratulate ourselves on an improvement in the public taste and intelligence, and it is true that some popular authors conciliate their admirers by an appeal in a comparatively subdued note. But—who has a popularity like to that of Dickens? Should there again rise an author to be compared with him in sincerity and universality of acceptance, once more will be heard that unmistakable voice of summons to Goodman Dull. We are educated, we are cultured; be it so; but, to say the least, some few millions of us turn with weariness from pages of concentrated art. Fifty years ago the people who did *not* might have been gathered from the English-speaking world into a London hall, without uncomfortable crowding. Dickens well understood that he must cry aloud and spare not; he did it naturally, as a man of his generation; he, and his fellow reformers, educators, popular entertainers, were perforce vociferous to the half-awakened multitudes. Carlyle was even more emphatic, and reiterated throughout a much longer life. Education notwithstanding, these will again be the characteristics of any writer for

whom fate reserves a gigantic popularity in the century just beginning.

Yes, it is quite true that Mr. Micawber, Mr. Pecksniff, Uriah Heep, and all Dickens's prominent creations say the same thing in the same way, over and over again. The literary exquisite is disgusted, the man of letters shakes his head with a smile. Remember: for twenty months did these characters of favourite fiction make a periodical appearance, and not the most stupid man in England forgot them between one month and the next. The method is at the disposal of all and sundry; who will use it to this effect?

In his satires on "high life", Dickens was less successful than with the middle class. I have spoken of Sir Leicester Dedlock and Cousin Feenix, both well done, the latter especially, and characterizations worthy of the author, but they hold no place in the general memory. His earliest attempt at this kind of thing was unfortunate; Lord Frederick Verisopht and Sir Mulberry Hawk are on a par with the literary lady in *Pickwick*, who wrote the ode to an Expiring Frog — an exercise of fancy which has no relation whatever to the facts of life. Possibly the young author of *Nicholas Nickleby* fancied he had drawn a typical baronet and a lord; more likely he worked with conscious reference to the theatre. In *Little Dorrit* we are introduced to certain high-born or highly-

connected people, who make themselves deliberately offensive, but their names cannot be recalled. Much better is the study of an ancient worldling in Edith Dombey's mother, Mrs. Skewton. Her paralytic seizure, her death in life, are fine and grisly realism; but we do not accept Mrs. Skewton as a typical figure. Too obvious is the comparison with Thackeray's work; Dickens is here at a grave disadvantage, and would have done better not to touch that ground at all. Perhaps the same must be said of his incursions into political satire; and yet, one would be loth to lose the Circumlocution Office. Though by the choice of such a name he seems to forbid our expecting any picture of reality, there seems reason to believe that those pages of *Little Dorrit* are not much less true than amusing; at all events they are admirably written. Of the Barnacle family we accept readily enough the one who is described as bright and young; indeed, this youngster is a good deal of a gentleman, and represents the surviving element of that day's Civil Service; under a competitive system, he alone would have a chance. His relatives have significance enough, but very little life. Dickens wrote of them in anger, which was never the case in his satiric masterpieces. Anger abundantly justified, no doubt; but at the same time another critic of the English government was making heard his wrathful voice (it came

from Chelsea), and with more of the true prophetic vehemence. Dickens did not feel at home in this Barnacle atmosphere; something of personal feeling entered into his description of its stifling properties. He could write brilliantly on the subject, but not with the calmness necessary for the creation of lasting characters.

The upstarts of commerce and speculation came more within his scope. Montague Tigg keeps a place in one's recollection, but chiefly, I think, as the impecunious braggart rather than as the successful knave. There is an impressiveness about Mr. Merdle, but perhaps rather in the description of his surroundings than in the figure of the man himself; readers in general know nothing of him, his name never points a paragraph. The Veneerings, in *Our Mutual Friend*, seem better on a re-reading than in a memory of the acquaintance with them long ago. This is often the case with Dickens, and speaks strongly in his favour. They smell of furniture polish; their newness in society is a positive distress to the nerves; to read of them is to revive a sensation one has occasionally experienced in fact. Being but sketches, they are of necessity (in Dickens's method) *all* emphasis; we never lose sight of their satiric meaning; their very name (like that of the Circumlocution Office) signals caricature. At this point Dickens connects himself once more with literary traditions; we are

reminded of the nomenclature of English drama; of Justice Greedy, of Anthony Absolute, Mrs. Malaprop, and the rest. It is only in his subordinate figures, and rarely then, that he falls into this bad habit, so destructive of illusion. For the most part, his names are aptly selected, or invented with great skill—skill, of course, different from that of Balzac, who aims at another kind of effectiveness. Gamp, Micawber, Bumble, Pipchin—to be sure they are so familiar to us that we associate them inevitably with certain characters, but one recognizes their exquisite rightness. Pecksniff is more daring, and touches the limit of fine discretion. In a very few cases he drew upon that list of grotesque names which anyone can compile from a directory, names which are generally valueless in fiction just because they really exist; Venus, for example.

Anything but a caricature, though as significant a figure as any among these minor groups, is Mr. Casby in *Little Dorrit*, the venerable grandsire, of snowy locks and childlike visage; the Patriarch, as he is called, who walks in a light of contemplative benevolence. Mr. Casby is a humbug of a peculiarly dangerous kind; under various disguises he is constantly met with in the England of to-day. This sweetly philosophic being owns houses, and those of the kind which we now call slums. Of course he knows nothing about their evil condition; of course he

employs an agent to collect his rents, and is naturally surprised when this agent falls short in the expected receipts. It pains him that human nature should be so dishonest; for the sake of his tenants themselves it behoves him to insist on full and regular payment. When, in the end, Mr. Casby has his impressive locks ruthlessly shorn by the agent risen in revolt against such a mass of lies and cruelty and unclean selfishness, we feel that the punishment is inadequate. This question of landlordism should have been treated by Dickens on a larger scale; it remains one of the curses of English life, and is likely to do so until the victims of house-owners see their way to cut, not the hair, but the throats, of a few selected specimens. Mr. Casby, nowadays, does not take the trouble to assume a sweet or reverend aspect; if he lives in the neighbourhood of his property, he is frankly a brute; if, as is so often the case, he resides in a very different part of the town, his associates are persons who would smile indeed at any affectation of sanctity. In this, and some other directions, hypocrisy has declined among us. Our people of all classes have advanced in the understanding of business, a word which will justify most atrocities, and excuse all but every form of shamelessness.

That rich little book, *Great Expectations*, contains a humbug less offensive than Casby, and on the surface greatly amusing, but illustrative of a

contemptible quality closely allied with the commercial spirit. Seen at a distance Mr. Pumblechook is a source of inextinguishable laughter; near at hand he is seen to be a very sordid creature. A time-server to his marrow, he adds the preposterous self-esteem which always gave Dickens so congenial an opportunity. Here we have a form of moral dishonesty peculiar to no one people. Mr. Pumblechook's barefaced pretence that he is the maker of Pip's fortune, his heavy patronage whilst that fortune endures, and his sour desertion of the young man when circumstances alter, is mere overfed humanity discoverable all the world over. He has English traits, and we are constrained to own the man as a relative; we meet him as often as we do the tailor who grovels before the customer unexpectedly become rich. Compare him with the other embodiments of dishonesty, and it is seen, not only what inexhaustible material of this kind lay at Dickens's command, but with what excellent art he differentiates his characters.

Less successful are the last pieces of satiric drawing I can find space to mention. In this chapter, rather than in the next, is the place for Mrs. Jellyby, who loses all distinction of sex, and comes near to losing all humanity, in her special craze. Women have gone far towards such a consummation, and one dare not refuse to admit her possibility; but the extravagance of the thing

rather repels, and we are never so assured of Mrs. Jellyby as of Mr. Pecksniff. Unacceptable in the same way is that fiercely charitable lady who goes about with her tracts and her insolence among the cottages of the poor. One knows how such persons nowadays demean themselves, and we can readily believe that they behaved more outrageously half a century ago; but being meant as a type, this religious female dragoon misses the mark; we refuse credence and turn away.

Caricature in general is a word of depreciatory meaning. I have already made it clear how far I am from agreeing with the critics who think that to call Dickens a caricaturist, and to praise his humour, is to dismiss him once for all. It seems to me that in all his very best work he pursues an ideal widely apart from that of caricature in any sense; and that in other instances he permits himself an emphasis, like in kind to that of the caricaturist, but by its excellence of art, its fine sincerity of purpose, removed from every inferior association. To call Mrs. Gamp a caricature is an obvious abuse of language; not less so, I think, to apply the word to Mr. Pecksniff or to Uriah Heep. Occasionally, missing the effect he intended, Dickens produced work which invites this definition; at times, again, he deliberately drew a figure with that literary overcharging which corresponds to the exaggeration, small or great, of professed caricaturists with the pencil.

His finest humour, his most successful satire, belongs to a different order of art. To be convinced of this one need but think of the multiplicity of detail, all exquisitely finished, which goes to make his best-known portraits. Full justice has never been done to this abounding richness of invention, this untiring felicity of touch in minutiæ innumerable. Caricature proceeds by a broad and simple method. It is no more the name for Dickens's full fervour of creation, than for Shakespeare's in his prose comedy. Each is a supreme idealist.

CHAPTER VII

WOMEN AND CHILDREN

With female readers Dickens was never a prime favourite. One feels very sure that they contributed little or nothing to the success of *Pickwick*. In the angelic Oliver they began, no doubt, to find matter of interest, and thence onward they might "take to" the triumphant novelist for the pathos of his child-life and to some extent because of his note of domesticity. But on the whole it was for men that Dickens wrote. To-day the women must be very few who by deliberate choice open a volume of his works.

The humorist never strongly appeals to that audience. Moreover, it is natural enough that a writer so often boisterous, who deals so largely with the coarser aspects of life, who gives us very little of what is conventionally called tenderness, and a good deal of bloodthirsty violence, should yield to many others in women's choice. For certain of them, Dickens is simply "vulgar"—and there an end of it; they can no more read him with pleasure than they can his forerunners of the eighteenth century. In a class where this might not be honestly felt as an objection, he is practically unknown to mothers and daughters

who devote abundant leisure to fiction of other kinds; and representatives of this public have been known to speak of him with frank dislike. One reason, it seems, for such coldness in presumably gentle hearts goes deeper than those which first suggest themselves. If George Eliot was of opinion that Shakespeare shows himself unjust to women, and on that account could not wholly revere him, we need not be surprised that average members of her sex should see in Dickens something like a personal enemy, a confirmed libeller of all who speak the feminine tongue.

For, setting aside his would-be tragic figures, the Lady Dedlocks and Edith Dombeys of whom enough has been said; neglecting also for the moment his exemplars in the life of home (doubtfully sympathetic to female readers of our day); it is obvious that Dickens wrote of women in his liveliest spirit of satire. Wonderful as fact, and admirable as art, are the numberless pictures of more or less detestable widows, wives, and spinsters which appear throughout his books. Beyond dispute, they must be held among his finest work; this portraiture alone would establish his claim to greatness. And I think it might be forcibly argued that, for incontestable proof of Dickens's fidelity in reproducing the life he knew, one should turn in the first place to his gallery of foolish, ridiculous, or offensive women.

These remarkable creatures belong for the most part to one rank of life, that which we vaguely designate as the lower middle class. In general their circumstances are comfortable; they suffer no hardship—save that of birth, which they do not perceive as such; nothing is asked of them but a quiet and amiable discharge of household duties; they are treated by their male kindred with great, often with extraordinary, consideration. Yet their characteristic is acidity of temper and boundless licence of querulous or insulting talk. The real business of their lives is to make all about them as uncomfortable as they can. Invariably, they are unintelligent and untaught; very often they are flagrantly imbecile. Their very virtues (if such persons can be said to have any) become a scourge. In the highways and by-ways of life, by the fireside, and in the bed-chamber, their voices shrill upon the terrified ear. It is difficult to believe that death can stifle them; one imagines them upon the threshold of some other world, sounding confusion among unhappy spirits who hoped to have found peace.

There needs no historical investigation to ascertain the truthfulness of these presentments. Among the poorer folk, especially in London, such women may be observed to-day by any inquirer sufficiently courageous; they are a multitude that no man can number; every other house in the cheap suburbs will be found to

contain at least one specimen—very often two, for the advantage of quarrelling when men are not at hand. Education has done little as yet to improve the tempers and the intellects of women in this rank. A humorist of our time suggests that sheer dulness and monotony of existence explains their unamiable habits, that they quarrel because they can get no other form of excitement. I believe there is some truth in this, but it does not cover the whole ground. Many a woman who frequents theatres and music-halls, goes shopping and lives in comparative luxury, has brought the arts of ill-temper to high perfection. Indeed, I am not sure that increase of liberty is not tending to exasperate these evil characteristics in women vulgarly bred; if Dickens were now writing, I believe he would have to add to his representative women the well-dressed shrew who proceeds on the slightest provocation from fury of language to violence of act. Mrs. Varden does not dream of assaulting her husband, for in truth she loves him; Mrs. Snagsby is in genuine terror at the thought that the deferential law-stationer may come to harm. Nowadays these ladies would enjoy a very much larger life, would systematically neglect their children (if they chose to have any), and would soothe their nerves, in moments carefully chosen, by flinging at the remonstrant husband any domestic object to which they attached no special value.

Through his early life Dickens must have been in constant observation of these social pests. In every lodging-house he entered, such a voice would surely be sounding. His women use utterance such as no male genius could have invented; from the beginning he knew it perfectly, the vocabulary, the syntax, the figurative flights of this appalling language. "God's great gift of speech abused" was the commonplace of his world. Another man, obtaining his release from those depths, would have turned away in loathing; Dickens found therein matter for his mirth, material for his art. When one thinks of it, how strange it is that such an unutterable curse should become, in the artist hands, an incitement to joyous laughter! As a matter of fact, these women produced more misery than can be calculated. That he does not exhibit this side of the picture is the peculiarity of Dickens's method; a defect, of course, from one point of view, but inseparable from his humorous treatment of life. Women who might well have wrecked homes, are shown as laughable foils for the infinite goodness and patience of men about them. Justly, by the by, a matter of complaint to the female critic. Weller, and Varden, and Snagsby, and Joe Gargery are too favourable specimens of the average husband; in such situations, one or other of them would certainly have lost his patience, and either have fled the country, or have turned

wife-beater. Varden is a trifle vexed now and then, but he clinks it off at his cheery anvil, and restores his jovial mood with a draught from Toby. Mr. Snagsby coughs behind his hand, is nervously perturbed, and heartily wishes things were otherwise, but never allows himself a harsh word to his "little woman". As for Joe Gargery, what could be expected of the sweetest and humanest temper man was ever blest withal? No, it is decidedly unfair. Not even Jonas Chuzzlewit (who, of course, has a martyr of a wife) can outbalance such a partial record of long-suffering in husbands.

It is worth while to consider with some attention these promoters of public mirth. *Pickwick* would have been incomplete without this element of joviality, and we are not likely to forget the thorn in the flesh of Mr. Weller, senior. Sam's father is responsible, I suppose, for that jesting on the subject of widows, which even to-day will serve its turn on the stage or in the comic paper; it is vulgar, to be sure, but vulgarity in *Pickwick* becomes a fine art; we cannot lose a word of the old coaching hero. Mrs. Weller it is hard to describe in moderate terms; taking the matter prosaically, she has all the minor vices that can inhere in woman; but the mere mention of her moves to chuckling. On her death-bed, we are given to understand, she saw the error of her ways. Such persons

occasionally do, but her conversion comes a trifle late. Enough for Dickens that we are touched by the old man's spirit of forgiveness. It is the bit of light in a picture felt, after all, to be grimy enough; the bit of sweet and clean humanity which our author always desires to show after he has made his fun out of sorry circumstance. In *Oliver Twist*, the feminine note grows shriller; we have Mrs. Sowerberry, sordid tyrant and scold, and the woman who becomes Mrs. Bumble. We are meant to reflect, of course, that the "porochial" dignitary gets only his deserts; he who marries with his eye upon a pair of silver sugar-tongs, and is a blustering jackass to boot, can hardly be too severely dealt with. So Mrs. Bumble exhibits her true self for her husband's benefit, and, so far as we know, does not repent of her triumphs as an obese virago. *Barnaby Rudge* is enriched with Mrs. Varden and her handmaid Miggs. Now of Mrs. Varden it can be said that she typifies a large class of most respectable wives. She is not coarse, she is not malignant, she is not incapable of good-humour; but so much value does she attach to the gleams of that bright quality, that not one is suffered to escape her until her household has been brought to the verge of despair by her persistent sourness and sulkiness. No reason whatever can be assigned for it; when she takes offence, it pleases her to do so. She has in perfection all the illogicality of

thought, all the maddening tricks of senseless language, which, doubtless for many thousands of years, have served her like for weapons. It is an odd thing that evolution has allowed the persistence of this art, for we may be quite sure that many a primitive woman paid for it with a broken skull. Here it is, however, flourishing, and like to flourish. The generations do not improve upon it; this art of irritation has long ago been brought to its highest possible point. Who knows? A future civilization may discover lapses of common-sense and a finesse of fatuous language unknown to Mrs. Varden. For the present, she points a limit of possibility in these directions. Her talk is marvellously reported; never a note of exaggeration, and nothing essential ever forgotten. The same is always to be noted in Dickens's idiotic women; their phrases might have been taken down by a phonograph for reproduction in literature. Such accuracy is a very great thing indeed; few novelists can compare in it with Dickens. His men he may permit to luxuriate in periods obviously artificial; their peculiarities are sometimes overdone, their talk becomes a fantasia of the author's elaboration, but with his women (of the class we are reviewing) it is never so. Partly, no doubt, because one cannot exaggerate what is already exaggerated to the n'th power; but it was very possible to miss the absolutely

right in such a maze of imbecilities, and I believe that Dickens does it never.

Mrs. Varden repents, Mrs. Varden is stricken with remorse, Mrs. Varden becomes a model wife. Let the Jew believe it! Not even on her death-bed did it happen, but simply because she had a fright in the Gordon riots. Yes; for one week, or perchance for two, she might have affected (even felt) penitence; after that, Heaven pity poor Gabriel for having taken her at her word! The thing is plainly impossible. Such women, at her age, are incapable of change; they will but grow worse, till the pangs of death shake them. Mrs. Varden would have lingered to her ninetieth year, mopping and mowing her ill-humour when language failed, and grinning illogicality with toothless gums. She is converted, to make things pleasant for us. We thank the author's goodness, and say, 'tis but a story.

Miggs, the admirer of Sam Tappertit, is idiocy and malice combined. To tell the truth, one does not much like to read of Miggs: we feel it is all a little hard upon women soured by celibacy. Dickens's time *was* hard indeed on the unwilling spinster, and we do not think it an amiable trait. Nowadays things are so different; it is common to find spinsters who are such by choice, and not a few of them are doing good work in the world. Sixty years ago, every un-

married woman of a certain age was a subject of open or covert mockery: she had failed in her chase of men, and must be presumed full of rancour against both sexes. As for Miggs, of course the detestable Mrs. Varden was largely answerable for her evil qualities; when the handmaid was turned out of doors, the mistress should by rights have gone with her. She amuses a certain class of readers, but has not much value either as humour or satire or plain fact.

There looms upon us the lachrymose countenance of Mrs. Gummidge. This superannuated nuisance serves primarily, of course, to illustrate the fine qualities of the Peggotty household; that she is borne with for one day says indeed much for their conscientious kindness. The boatman, delicately sympathetic, explains her fits of depression by saying that she has "been thinking of the old 'un". Possibly so, and the result of her mournful reflection is that she behaves with monstrous ingratitude to the people who keep her out of the workhouse. "I'm a lone lorn creature, and everything goes contrairy with me." This vice of querulousness is one of the most intolerable beheld by the sun. Dickens merely smiles; and of course it is large-hearted in him to do so: he would have us forbearing with such poor creatures, would have us understand that they suffer as well as cause suffering to others. One acknowledges the justice of the lesson. But we

have not done with Mrs. Gummidge; together with the Yarmouth family, she emigrated to Australia, and there—became a bright, happy, serviceable woman! Converted, she, by the great grief that had befallen her friends; made ashamed of whining over megrims when death and shame were making havoc in the little home. Well, it may have been so; but Mrs. Gummidge was very old for such a ray of reason to pierce her skull. In any case, we do not think of her in Australia. She sits for ever in the house on Yarmouth sands (sands not yet polluted by her kin from Whitechapel), and shakes her head and pipes her eye, a monument of selfish misery.

Behold Mrs. Snagsby. To all Mrs. Varden's vices this woman adds one that may be strongly recommended for the ruin of domestic peace when the others have failed—if fail they can. She is jealous of the little law-stationer; she imagines for him all manner of licentious intrigues. That such imagination is inconsistent with the plainest facts of life in no way invalidates its hold upon Mrs. Snagsby's mind. She will make things as unpleasant as possible in the grimy house in Cook's Court; the little man shall have rest neither day nor night; his life shall become a burden to him. And goodness knows that the house, at the best of times, falls a good deal short of cheerfulness. There is Guster. Who shall restrain a laugh, hearing of Guster? Plainly

described, this girl is an underpaid, underfed, and overworked slavey, without a friend in the world,—unless it be Mr. Snagsby,—and subject to frequent epileptic fits. And we roar with laughter as often as she is named! It is Dickens's pleasure that we shall do so, and, if it comes to defence of so strange a subject of humour, one can only say that, from a certain point of view, everything in this world is laughable. Look broadly enough, and it is undoubtedly amusing that such a woman as Mrs. Snagsby should coarsely tyrannize over a poor diseased creature, who toils hard and lives on a pittance. But, in strictness, the humour here perceivable is not of the kind we usually attribute to Dickens; it has something either of philosophic sublimity or of mortal bitterness. For my own part, I think Dickens points, in such situations as this, to larger significances than were consciously in his mind. I may return to the matter in speaking expressly of his humour; here we are specially concerned with the exhibition of Mrs. Snagsby's personality. Happily, she undergoes no moral palingenesis; by the date of *Bleak House* her creator had outgrown the inclination for that kind of thing. We are sure that she made the deferential little man miserable to the end of his days; and when she had buried him, she held forth for many years more on the martyrdom of her married life. She is decidedly more hateful

than Mrs. Varden, by virtue of her cruelty to the girl, and more of a force for ill by virtue of her animal jealousy. In short—a most amusing figure.

It certainly is a troublesome fact for sensitive female readers that this, a great English novelist of the Victorian age, so abounds in women who are the curse of their husbands' lives. A complete list of them would, I imagine, occupy nearly a page of this book. Mrs. Jellyby I have already discussed. I have spoken of the much more lifelike Mrs. Pocket, a capital portrait. I have alluded to the uncommon realism of Dr. Marigold's wife. A mention must at least be made of Mrs. Macstinger, who, as Mrs. Bunsby, enters upon such a promising field of fresh activity. But there remains one full-length picture which we may by no means neglect, its name Mrs. Joe Gargery.

Mrs. Gargery belongs to Dickens's later manner. In such work as this, his hand was still inimitably true, and his artistic conscience no longer allowed him to play with circumstance as in the days of Mrs. Varden. The blacksmith's wife is a shrew of the most highly developed order. If ever she is good-tempered in the common sense of the word, she never lets it be suspected; without any assignable cause, she is invariably acrid, and ready at a moment's notice to break into fury of abuse. It gratifies her

immensely to have married the softest-hearted man that ever lived, and also that he happens to be physically one of the strongest; the joy of trampling upon him, knowing that he who could kill her with a backhand blow will never even answer the bitterest insult with an unkind word! It delights her, too, that she has a little brother, a mere baby still, whom she can ill-use at her leisure, remembering always that every harshness to the child is felt still worse by the big good fellow, her husband. Do you urge that Dickens should give a cause for this evil temper? Cause there is none—save of that scientific kind which has no place in English novels. It is the peculiarity of these women that no one can conjecture why they behave so ill. The nature of the animals—nothing more can be said.

Notice, now, that in Mrs. Gargery, though he still disguises the worst of the situation with his unfailing humour, Dickens gives us more of the harsh truth than in any previous book. That is a fine scene where the woman, by a malicious lie, causes a fight between Joe and Orlick; a true illustration of character, and well brought out. Again, Mrs. Joe's punishment. Here we are very far from the early novels. Mrs. Gargery shall be brought to quietness; but how? By a half-murderous blow on the back of her head, from which she will never recover. Dickens understood by this time that there is no other

efficacious way with these ornaments of their sex. A felling and stunning and all but killing blow, followed by paralysis and slow death. A sharp remedy, but no whit sharper than the evil it cures. Mrs. Gargery, under such treatment, learns patience and the rights of other people. We are half sorry she cannot rise and put her learning into practice, but there is always a doubt. As likely as not she would take to drinking, and enter on a new phase of ferocity.

Of higher social standing, not perhaps better educated but certainly better bred, are the women who acknowledge their great exemplar in Mrs. Nickleby. This lady—all things considered, the term may be applied without abuse—has passed the greater part of her life in a rural district, and morally she belongs, I think, rather to the country than the town; there is a freshness about her, a *naïveté* not—up to a certain point—disagreeable; her manners and conversation are suggestive of long afternoons, and evenings of infinite leisure. Mrs. Nickleby is, above all, well-meaning; according to her lights she is gracious and tolerant; she has natural affections, and would be sincerely distressed by a charge of selfishness. Unhappily the poor woman has been born with the intellectual equipment of a Somerset ewe. It would be a delicate question of psychology to distinguish her from the harmless, smiling idiot whom we think it unnecessary

and cruel to put under restraint. One may say, indeed, that this defect is radical in all Dickens's female characters; the better-hearted succeed in keeping it out of sight—in the others it becomes flagrant and a terror. Sixty years ago there was practically no provision in England for the mental training of women. Sent early to a good school, and kept there till the age, say, of one-and-twenty, Mrs. Nickleby would have grown into a quite endurable gentlewoman, aware of her natural weakness, and a modest participant in general conversation. Allowed to develop in her own way, and married to a man only less unintelligent than herself, she puts forth a wonderful luxuriance of amiable fatuity. Thoughts, in the strict sense of the word, she has none; her brain is a mere blind mechanism for setting in motion an irresponsible tongue; together they express in human language the sentiments of the ewe aforesaid. Mr. Nickleby died in the prime of life; what else could be the fate of a man doomed to listen to this talk morning, noon, and night? With Mrs. Nickleby one cannot converse; she understands the meaning of nothing that is said to her; she is incapable of answering a question, or of seeing the logical bearings of any statement whatsoever. One conviction is impressed upon her (pardon the word) mind: that throughout life she has invariably said and done the right thing, and that other persons, in their relations

with her, have been as invariably wrong. Let events turn how they may, they do but serve to confirm her complacent position. Having exerted herself to the utmost in urging a particular line of conduct, which, on trial, proves to have been the worst that could have been followed, Mrs. Nickleby blandly reminds her victims that she had known from the first, and repeatedly declared, what would be the result of such manifest imprudence. Should this lead to an outbreak of masculine impatience, not to say anger, the good lady receives a nervous shock, under which she pales, and pants, and falters as the domestic martyr, the victim of surprising unreason and brutality. As it happens, she does not bring her children to the gutter and herself to the workhouse; we acknowledge the providence that watches over exemplary fools. And after all, as men must laugh at something, it is as well that they should find in Mrs. Nickleby matter for mirth. She is ubiquitous, and doubtless always will be. She cannot be chained and muzzled, or forbidden to propagate her kind. We must endure her, as we endure the caprices of the sky. An ultimate fact of nature, and a great argument for those who decline to take life too seriously.

This was early work of Dickens, but not to be improved upon by any increase of experience or of skill. A good many years later, he produced

a companion portrait, that of Flora Finching in *Little Dorrit*—the neglected book which contains several of his best things. We are told that the picture is from life (as was that of Mrs. Nickleby), and that the exuberant Flora, in the bloom of her youth, had been to Dickens himself even what Dora was to David Copperfield—a piece of biography in which one is very willing to put faith. I am disposed to credit Flora Finching with mental power superior to Mrs. Nickleby's; the preference may provoke a charge of subtlety, but I adhere to it after a long acquaintance with both ladies. Indeed, one rather likes Flora. Of course she has killed her husband; but one chooses to forget all that. Flora, to tell the truth, has some imagination, a touch of poetry; in her heart she is convinced that as Mrs. Clennam she would have been a happier woman. Yet she has sense enough and fantasy enough only to play with the thought; it becomes something graceful in her commonplace life; a little lacking in delicacy, she causes her old lover some embarrassment, but never seriously hopes to win him back. When Clennam marries little Dorrit, Flora behaves admirably—the all-sufficient proof of what I have just said. Her character is in truth a very strong plea for the fair education of women. Flora needed but that; it would have made her, I really think, rather a charming person. Nowadays one will rarely meet any one

suggestive of her; for she was at all times an exception in the vulgar world, and her like have since been schooled into the self-restraint, of which, under favourable conditions, they are perfectly capable. The species of sentimentality seen in Flora was at that time fed upon songs and verses congenial to the feeble mind; born thirty years later, Flora would have been led to a much better taste in that direction, with the result of greater self-command in all. She is a kind soul, and doubtless became a very pleasant, even useful, friend of little Mrs. Clennam. Such a woman is only dangerous when she feels that the law has surrendered to her a real live man—has given him, bound hand and foot, to her care and her mercy. As a maid, as a widow, she will do no harm, nor wish to do any, beyond distressing the tympanum and tasking the patience of anyone with whom she genially converses.

One does not venture to begin praising work such as this. Eulogy would lose itself in enthusiasm. Pass, rather, to the gallery of women who are neither married shrews nor well-meaning pests, yet each peculiar for her mental and moral vice. We glance at Miss Squeers. Fanny, it is plain, has relatives in the pages of Smollett; one seems to remember a damsel in *Roderick Random* of whom, perhaps, the less said the better; the intercourse between Miss Squeers and Nicholas brings this chapter to mind, and points a change

alike in national manners and in literature. As a wife, Fanny would pass into that other category with which we have done. Her London parallel is perhaps Sophy Wackles, from whom Mr. Swiveller had so narrow and so fortunate an escape. Such maidens as these, Dickens must have had many opportunities of observing; his social canvas would have been imperfect without them. Though it seems unjust to put her in this place, I must mention Susan Nipper, the nurse of Florence Dombey. Susan begins well on the pattern of her class; she is snappy, and brief-tempered, fond of giving smacks and pulling hair; one sees no reason why with favouring circumstances she should not develop into a nagger of distinction. But something is observable in her which imposes caution on prophecy; we see that Susan, though a mere domestic, has a very unusual endowment of wit; she is sharp in retort, but also in perception; in any case she cannot become a mere mouthing idiot. In course of time we see that she has a good heart. And so it comes to pass that, in spite of origin and evil example, the girl grows in grace. She is fortunately situated; her sweet young mistress does her every kind of good; and when she marries Mr. Toots we have no misgivings whatever as to that eccentric gentleman's happiness.

Then, typical of a very large class indeed, comes Mrs. Crupp, who "does for" David

Copperfield in his chambers. It is unnecessary to use the short words which would adequately describe Mrs. Crupp; enough to say that she stands for the baser kind of London landlady—a phrase which speaks volumes. Some day it will cause laughter, indeed, and something else, to think that young men beginning life as students, and what not, should have fallen, as a matter of course, into the hand of Mrs. Crupp. Her name smells of strong liquor; it includes all dishonesty and uncleanliness. The monstrosity of her pretensions touches the highest point of the ludicrous. What, then, is one to say of Sarah Gamp, of Betsy Prig, considered as women? Of Mrs. Gamp in another aspect I have spoken at some length; she is one of those figures in Dickens to which one necessarily returns, again and again; as art, the very quintessence of his genius; as social fact, worthy of repeated contemplation. After all, women they are, these sister hags of the birth and death chamber. Mrs. Gamp has her own ideas of tender emotion; she is touched by the sight of an undertaker's children "playing at berryings down in the shop, and follerin' the order-book to its long home in the iron safe!" Be it remarked that there is an appreciable difference between Mrs. Gamp's nature and that of Mrs. Prig; we are clearly shown that Betsy is the harder, coarser, more mercenary of the twain. If well plied with

spirits and pickled cucumber, Sarah Gamp might be capable of an elementary generosity; it is our perception of this which helps to keep the creature amusing, where she might so easily sink below everything but our contemptuous disgust. Betsy Prig is of a lower order, even socially; one may be sure that she had much less to do with the better class of clients. There is in her a spitefulness, a greedy malignancy, not found in the nurse of Kingsgate Street; where Mrs. Gamp would exhibit hostility in astounding contortions of thick-throated phrase, irresistibly laughable, Betsy Prig would fall into the mere language of the gutter. Their quarrel (one of the great things in literature) makes proof of this, though Dickens's most adroit idealism avoids the offensiveness of the real dialogue. As a girl —try to imagine Sarah Gamp as a young girl! We know where and how she lived, what examples she had. It was practically Hogarth's London which saw her birth and breeding; but the London of to-day is well able to produce such women; one catches a glimpse of her life in the market streets, and the public-houses. Well, as a girl she must have been very plump and good-humoured, with quaint turns of speech, foretelling the eloquence of her prime. Mr. Ruskin has well pointed out the broad distinction between this London jargon and anything worthy of being called a dialect (by the by, the

dialect on which London has exercised its deforming influence is that of Essex, where a confusion of *v* and *w*, no longer heard in town, may still be noticed); he adds that the speech of Mrs. Gamp is pure vulgarity, its insurpassable illustration. And the woman herself (one lingers over her affectionately) may be dismissed as vulgarity incarnate. Her profession, her time, even her sex, may, from this point of view, be called accidents. Desiring to study the essential meaning of the *vulgar*, one turns from every living instance, every acute disquisition, and muses over Sarah Gamp.

When we speak of the working-class, we understand something quite distinct from, though not of necessity inferior to, the classes represented by all these women; though Mrs. Gargery, no doubt, belongs to that social order. With the working-class household, Dickens, I think, is never entirely successful; one reason among others being that he shrinks from criticising the very poor. In the homes of toilers his great heart has its way, and he can only in general show us such people at their best. But one recalls two working-class women, who, however gently drawn, are living characters: Polly Toodle and Mrs. Plornish. Paul Dombey's nurse, who would have it considered in the wages if she is to be called "out of her name", and who as the mother of Rob the Grinder suffers so many

anxieties, may fairly stand for a good woman of the proletary; and how very favourably she compares with ordinary women in the class (for reasons of money) just above her! She is not vulgar, and, as a typical good wife in that rank, need not be so; for it is easier to escape such taint in the house of the engine-driver Toodle than in Mr. Snagsby's upstairs parlour. Mrs. Plornish, the plasterer's wife, is likewise an excellent creature marked by more peculiarity; her firm belief that she makes herself intelligible to a foreigner by grotesque distortion of the English tongue is one of the truest and most amusing things in Dickens. Many a Mrs. Plornish honestly supposes that in order to speak foreign languages, it is only necessary—as I once heard one of them remark—to "learn how to twist the mouth". This is an innocent conviction, which disturbs nobody's peace. We like Mrs. Plornish, too, for her tenderness to the old father from the workhouse, and her sincere admiration when he pipes his thin little song. These women are blessed with a good temper, the source of everything enjoyable in life. However poor and ignorant, they shed about them the light of home. It is a type that does not much change, so far; and one thinks with misgivings of the day when that increased comfort which is their due, shall open to such women the dreadful possibilities of half-knowledge.

Come the eccentrics; of all classes, of all tempers; the signal for mirth. Here, I suppose, must be introduced the sister of Sampson Brass; though one finds it difficult to think of Miss Sally as feminine. She has the courage of her opinions, and shows something like heroism in scoundreldom, when brought face to face with the criminal law. One never met Miss Brass, but it is very possible that Dickens did. Later, he omits the ferocity from his grotesques. Miss Mowcher, we are told, was meant originally to play a very ugly part in the story of Emily and Steerforth, but an odd incident, nothing less than the reception of a letter from Miss Mowcher herself, led Dickens to use the character in quite another way, making it point a lesson of charity. Mr. Dombey's friend Miss Tox is a first-rate toady, if the word may be used of one so respectable and kind-hearted; she represents, with abundance of oddity, the army of genteel old maids, as the term was in that day understood. Miss Tox is out of date, or very nearly so; to-day she finds much better occupation than in prostrating herself before Mr. Dombey, or jealously watching the Major, or looking after her canaries; her goodness is reinforced by knowledge, and her presence is a blessing in many of the dark places of our vast city. Eccentric, indeed, but on a fine basis of sense and character, is the immortal Betsy Trotwood. Wasted in her time, or nearly so;

no scope for her beyond the care of Mr. Dick, varied by assaults upon seaside donkeys (the quadrupeds). To be sure, she is the making of David, but that came accidentally. But Miss Trotwood is in advance of her age; victim of a bad marriage, she does not see in this an all-sufficient destiny; where others would have passed their life in tears and tracts, Miss Betsy sets about making for herself a rational existence. We all know her—in various disguises, and should not be sorry to meet her more frequently. For the woman of sense and character is the salt of the earth; with however flagrant peculiarities, may she increase and multiply!

One remembers Miss La Creevy, in her way no less admirably independent. That she got her living by the travesty of art was a misfortune which neither she nor any of her contemporaries (half a dozen perhaps excepted) saw in that light, for she is of the Earliest Victorian. Remember-able, too, is the little doll's dressmaker in *Our Mutual Friend*, whose "bad child", her boneless drunkard of a father, keeps her leisure so fully occupied. But they are too numerous for several mention, these quaint examples of more or less distorted womankind—distorted by evil circum-stances, and then ridiculed by the world respon-sible for their abnormalities. Dickens looked on them with tenderness, and makes us like, or re-spect, them, even whilst we laugh. He saw, too,

the larger questions involved in their existence; but on these it was no part of his mission as a story-teller to insist. Had he uttered his whole thought it would hardly have satisfied us for whom a new century has begun. His view of the possibilities of womanhood becomes tolerably clear when we turn to his normal types of marriageable maiden.

In *Pickwick* there are several of them, and we think them vulgar. They must be called young ladies; they are in an easy position, and find it occupation enough to amuse themselves. Speaking plainly, Dickens as a young man could hardly have a just criterion of refinement; the damsels of Dingley Dell were probably as like ladies as anything he had seen. Does he mean them to be delicate in thought and speech and behaviour? Or is he designedly showing us the decent girl of an unrefined class? Their little screams—their shrill laughter—their amorous facetiousness—you will not find that kind of thing now at Dingley Dell; and even then, I fancy, it was rather out of place in the home of a country gentleman. Put these girls at Pentonville, and the picture excites no uneasiness.

Mrs. Varden, we know, had a daughter, and the blushing, laughing, petulant Dolly has always been a favourite. Has she not even given her name to millinery? For my own part, I see in Dolly her mother restored to youth, and notwith-

standing the Gordon riots, notwithstanding Joe Willet's loss of an arm in "the Salwanners, in America where the war is", I feel an unpleasant certainty as to Dolly's conduct when she becomes a matron. It was (and is) precisely because so many men admire the foolish in girlhood that at least an equal number deplore the intolerable in wives. Dolly is a sort of kitten. This comparison is used by George Eliot of Hetty Sorrel, and George Eliot used it advisedly; she knew very well indeed what comes of human kittenishness. The reader perhaps interposes, smilingly protests, that this is considering altogether too curiously; would hint, with civility, at a defect in appreciation of humour. But no; Dickens's humour and delightfulness are as much to me as to any man living. For the moment, I write of him as the social historian of his day, and endeavour to disclose his real thoughts concerning woman. To Dickens, Dolly Varden was an ideal maiden; one, to be sure, of several ideals which haunt the young man's brain. It is nothing to him that Dolly is totally without education, and that her mother's failings are traceable first and foremost to that very source. Instruction was needless for sweet seventeen; it tended, if anything, to blue-stockingism. Dolly's business in graver hours is to look after stockings of a more common hue. For relaxation, she may smirk and simper and tell little fibs, and smile treacher-

ous little smiles, and on occasion drop a little tear, which means nothing but pique or selfish annoyance. This is the very truth of Dolly. But she wore a delicious hat, and had a dainty little mouth, and was altogether so very kittenish; and to the end of time poor Gabriel Varden, poor Joe Willet, will find these things irresistible.

Passing to a book written nearly a quarter of a century after *Barnaby Rudge*, I discover Dolly in a new incarnation; she has learnt somewhat, she obeys a stricter rule of decorum, and her name is now Bella Wilfer. I admit that Miss Wilfer belongs to a slightly, very slightly, higher grade of society, but in those five-and-twenty years all things had advanced. Of Bella one easily grants the charm, and one admires her for not being more spoilt by good fortune; we perceive, however, the old traits; we tremble, now and then, at lurking kittenishness. It is permitted us to behold Bella as wife and mother, and we see her doing well in both relations; but the peril is not past. There will come a day when her husband is less fascinated by pretty ways, when he wants a little intellectual companionship by his fireside, and that moment must test Bella's mettle. Dolly would have made hopeless failure, reproducing Mrs. Varden in the sourest particulars. Bella, perchance, had her self-respect strengthened by the example of her time, and fought down the worst of the feminine.

Between *Barnaby* and *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens had portrayed many girls. Early come the daughters of Mr. Pecksniff, Charity and Mercy, "not unholy names, I hope". They are masterpieces, finished to the nail. Here—I cannot remind the reader too often of this fact in regard to Dickens's women—one discerns absolutely nothing of "exaggeration"; not a word, not a gesture, goes beyond the very truth. Here the master would have nothing to learn from later art; he is the realist's exemplar. How admirably are these sisters likened and contrasted! That Jonas Chuzzlewit's wife becomes broken in spirit, meek, morally hopeful, is no instance of such literary optimism as one has noticed elsewhere, but a strict development of character. Her sister's rancorous appetency, with its train of consequences, belongs no less to nature. The artist must glory in these figures, so representative, so finely individualized. Public merriment has, of course, done them only the scantiest justice; their value cannot be appraised in laughter. They are among the most precious things left to us by Victorian literature.

Together with them, let me speak of Fanny Dorrit. In the London of to-day there is a very familiar female type, known as the shop-girl. Her sphere of action is extensive, for we meet her not only in shops, strictly speaking, but at liquor-bars, in workrooms, and, unfortunately,

sometimes in the post-office, to say nothing of fifty other forms of employment open to the underbred, and more or less aggressive, young woman. Dickens saw nothing like so much of her, but he has drawn her portrait, with unerring hand, in Fanny Dorrit. Her first characteristic is a paltry and ignorant ambition, of course allied with vanity; she is crudely selfish, and has only the elementary scruples of her sex. Withal, there glimmers in her, under favouring circumstance, a vulgar good-nature; if she has much to spare she will bestow it upon those she likes, and at all times she prefers to see cheerfulness around her. In a time of social transition, when the woman-kind of labourer and office-man tend to inter-mingle, and together gall the kibes of the daughters of quick-growing capital, Fanny becomes a *question*. It is not easy to get her taught, either in literature or good manners; it is not easy to recompense her services, such as they are, on a scale which makes her free of the temptation ever present to this class. When she marries, her knowledge of domestic duties is found to be on a par, say, with that of a news-paper-boy; her ideas as to expenditure resemble those of a prima donna. Miss Dorrit, we know, had an unhappy training; but not worse in degree, though different in kind, from that of her modern parallel. Dickens did not know how significant was the picture when working at

its details in the year of the Crimean War. Before his death he must have had many opportunities of recalling, and reflecting upon, the features of that young person.

It occurs to one how little love-making there is in all his books. This results, in part, from the fact of his dealing with a class which is anything but sentimental, and as little endowed with imagination as any order of civilized beings discoverable throughout the world; partly, again, from his own practical nature. Little Dorrit has her love story, and at one moment it is well told; the chapter describing her travel in Italy deserves high praise. But, on the whole, Amy Dorrit is not a success in characterization. Florence Dombey is, no doubt, in love, but we never think of it as more than the affection of a child; one forms no image whatever of her married life with Walter Gay. Then there is the shadowy betrothed of Richard Carstone, a good girl, to be sure, but remarkably placid. Esther Summerson cannot count, she has no existence. A favourite with readers of her own sex is Lizzie Hexam, and, putting aside her impossibility, Dickens has perhaps made her his most sympathetic love-heroine. One credits her with loyalty, with ardour; she is more nearly a poetical figure than that of any other girl in his books. Of Little Emily I find it difficult to say more than had its place in a previous chapter. She belongs to the

stage, where such a story as hers is necessarily presented in the falsest possible light. Let us note one thing, however. Out of regard for what we call propriety, is it not obvious that this girl is shown to us as acting with something like cold-blooded deliberation, the simplest form of true immorality? We have no hint of her temptation, and it really looks very much as if she had calculated the probable advantages of flight with Steerforth. I have always felt the same with regard to the central incident of *Adam Bede*; it comes upon one, at the first reading, as a moral shock. So determined are these novelists not to offend our precious delicacy, that in the upshot they offend it beyond endurance, springing upon us, so to speak, the results of uncontrollable passion, without ever allowing us to suspect that such a motive was in play. The effect of this is a sort of grossness, which dishonours our heroine. So far as we are permitted to judge, there is much reason in the insults hurled at Emily by the frantic Rosa Dartle—a pretty result, indeed, of all our author's delicate gliding over slippery places.

The Emperor Augustus, we are told, objected to the presence of women at the public games when athletes appeared unclad; but he saw nothing improper in their watching the death combats of gladiators. May we not find a parallel to this in the English censorship? To

exhibit the actual course of things in a story of lawless (nay, or of lawful) love is utterly forbidden; on the other hand, a novelist may indulge in ghastly bloodshed to any extent of which his stomach is capable. Dickens, the great writer, even appears on a public platform and recites with terrible power the murder of a prostitute by a burglar, yet hardly a voice is raised in protest. Gore is perfectly decent; but the secrets of an impassioned heart are too shameful to come before us even in a whisper.

On this account I do not think it worth while to speak of Nancy, or of other lost creatures appearing in Dickens. But read, I beg, that passage of *Little Dorrit* where Amy herself and her idiot friend Maggy, wandering about the streets at night, are addressed by a woman of the town (Book i, chap. 14); read that passage, and wonder that the same man who penned this shocking rubbish could have written in the same volume pages of a truthfulness beyond all eulogy.

Little Em'ly has, after all, but a subordinate part in *David Copperfield*. The leading lady is Dora. Dora is wooed, Dora is wed—the wooing and wedding of a butterfly. Yet it is Dickens's prettiest bit of love, and I shall scarce find it in my heart to criticise the "little Blossom", the gauze-winged fairy of that "insubstantial, happy, foolish time". Dora is Dolly Varden volatilized; every fault is there, prevented from becoming

vice only by utter lack of purpose. The feather-brained little creature has no responsibility; as reasonably would one begin to argue with her toy dog, Jip, when he takes his stand on the cookery book. I have said that we cannot look in *Copperfield* for any true picture of an author's daily life; but, worse than that, we have very comical misrepresentation. Think only of David at his desk and Dora holding the pens! Pray, how much work was our friend likely to get through with that charming assistance? But it is all a fantasy and defies the test of common daylight. Take Dora seriously, and at once you are compelled to ask by what right an author demands your sympathy for such a brainless, nerveless, profitless simpleton. Enter into the spirit of the chapter, and you are held by one of the sweetest dreams of humour and tenderness ever translated into language.

There is no better illustration of Dickens's progress with the time than a comparison of his heroine in *Edwin Drood* with those of the early books. I think it is a great misfortune that we so abruptly lost sight of Rosa Bud; if, as seemed likely, the development of her character was to go on throughout the story, she would have been by far the best of Dickens's intelligent and sympathetic women. At first we have misgivings; Dolly Varden and Dora and others of our old acquaintances seem blended in

Miss Twinkleton's pupil; a tricksy and provoking little person, whose reason for not knowing her own mind is probably the old one—that she has no mind to know. But presently we understand; the girl—little more than a child—is in a false position, and suffers under it very consciously. A few pages more, and we see her behaving with rational force of character, the silly prettiness is thrown aside; Rosa declares herself as sensible and just and kind a girl as one could wish to meet. In the days of *Copperfield*, Dickens could not have managed this characterization; in the days of *Barnaby Rudge* he could as soon have created Rosalind. Change of times, growth of experience, widening of artistic consciousness and power—all are evident in this study which was never to be completed. He laughs at Miss Twinkleton and her establishment, but we have an assurance that Rosa Bud was receiving a much better education than fell to the lot of girls thirty years before; even as we feel convinced that Mr. Crisparkle's tuition was a vast improvement upon that of Dr. Blimber. It is possible, of course, that Edwin Drood's paltry "mystery", with its blood and opium, would have ousted Rosa from the scene; perhaps we had seen the best of her. None the less, she remains a real and interesting little woman, and we should much have liked to watch the course of her affection for Tartar.

A "little woman". The phrase is inevitable

in speaking of Dickens's pets. A Lady Dedlock might have stature; a Betsy Trotwood even might be of average height; but Em'ly and Amy and Ruth, Dolly and Dora and Esther, must all be tiny vessels for their great virtues. Shakespeare took another view of this matter; but Shakespeare was not concerned with the lower middle-class of the nineteenth century. There is agreement, I am told, among trustworthy observers that the stature of English women has notably increased during the last two or three decades; a natural consequence of improvement in the conditions of their life. In Dickens's day, when girls took no sort of exercise, fed badly, and (amid London streets) never breathed fresh air, of course they were generally diminutive. And among all the little women he presents to us, who exhibits more concentrated charm of littleness than Ruth Pinch?

I have left her to the last, because she will serve us as the type of all that Dickens really admired in woman. Truth to tell, it was no bad ideal. Granted that the world must go on very much in the old way, that children must be born and looked after, that dinners must be cooked, that houses must be kept sweet, it is hard to see how Ruth Pinch can ever be supplanted. Ruth is no imbecile—your thoroughly kind-hearted and home-loving woman never will be; with opportunities, she would learn much, even beyond

domestic limits, and still would delight in her dainty little aprons, her pastry-board and roller. Ruth would be an excellent mother; when, in the latter days, she sat grey-haired and spectacled, surely would her children arise and call her blessed. A very homely little woman, to be sure. She could not be quite comfortable with domestics at her command; a little house, a little garden, the cooking her own peculiar care, a little maid for the little babies—this is her dream. But never, within those walls, a sound of complaining or of strife, never a wry face, acidly discontented with the husband's doings or sayings. Upon my word—is it a bad ideal?

There are who surmise that in the far-off time when girls are universally well-taught, when it is the exception to meet, in any class, with the maiden or the wife who deems herself a natural inferior of brother, lover, husband, the homely virtues of Ruth Pinch will be even more highly rated than in the stupid old world. There are who suspect that our *servant-question* foretells a radical change in ways of thinking about the life of home; that the lady of a hundred years hence will be much more competent and active in cares domestic than the average shopkeeper's wife to-day; that it may not be found impossible to turn from a page of Sophocles to the boiling of a potato, or even the scrubbing of a floor. When every spendthrift idiot of a mistress, and every

lying lazybones of a kitchen-wench, is swept into Time's dust-bin, it may come to pass that a race of brave and intelligent women will smile sister-like at this portrait of little Ruth. They will prize Dickens, instead of turning from him in disgust or weariness; for in his pages they will see that ancient deformity of their sex, and will recognize how justly he pointed out the way of safe reform; no startling innovation, no extravagant idealism, but a gentle insistence on the facts of human nature, a kindly glorifying of one humble little woman, who saw her duty, and did it singing the while.

A word or two about the children whom he loved to bring into his books, and to make pathetic or amusing. First, of course, we see little Nell; we see her, because she is the mid-figure in a delightful romance; but her face is not very plain to us. She is innocence walking among grotesque forms of suffering and wrong; simplicity set amid quaint contortions. Her death is not the dying of a little girl, but the vanishing of a beautiful dream. Oliver Twist is no more real, and certainly less interesting. Into what sort of man did this astonishing lad develop? The children of Dotheboys are writhing ghosts; perhaps they had lived in some other world, and were bad boys, and afterwards came into Squeers' hands for purification. Sally Brass's poor little slavey is, on the other hand,

well realized; a good study of childhood brought to the verge of idiocy by evil treatment. Tiny Tim serves his admirable purpose in a book which no one can bear to criticise; we know that he *did* die, but in his little lifetime he has softened many a heart. Next rises the son and heir of "our friend Dombey". Dickens believed that little Paul was one of the best things he had ever done; contemporary readers were much excited about the child, whose "old-fashioned" ways became a by-word. I do not find it difficult to accept Paul's enquiry about what the waves were saying (in spite of a most dreadful song, made of that passage, which sounds in my ears from long ago), and of a surety I give more credit to Paul's death-bed speeches than to those of the child in *Our Mutual Friend*, who bequeathed a kiss to "the boofer lady"; but on the whole, Mr. Dombey's hope has only a little more of substance than little Nell. His sister Florence is prettiness and gentleness; an abstraction which affects us not. Passing to young David Copperfield, it is a different matter. Here we have the author's vision of his own childhood, and he makes it abundantly convincing. This part of *Copperfield* is one of the narratives which every reader illustrates for himself; the poor little lad stands plain before us, as we read, and in our memory. The picture, I should say, suggests very faithfully an artist's early years, his suscepti-

bility, his abnormal faculty of observation, the vivid workings of his mind and heart. Dickens told Forster that this bit of autobiography might be worthy to stand on the shelf together with the corresponding part of that written by Holcroft. Holcroft is forgotten, I suppose; if the mention of him leads a stray reader to his book, that reader's time will not be wasted.

Of Dickens's true and deep sympathy with childhood there can be no doubt; it becomes passionate in the case of little ones doomed to suffering by a cruel or careless world. In all his excellent public speeches, perhaps the best and most moving passage is that which describes a poor baby he saw in Scotland, a wasting little mortal, whose cradle was an old egg-box; where, he says, it lay dumb and pitiful, its eyes seeming to wonder "why, in the name of an All-merciful God, such things should be". In his novels, we like those children best, of whom we obtain only a passing glimpse, the reason, again, being that remorseless necessity of drama which spoils so many of his older people. But in one case he has written a whole story about children, and these toddlers the most lifelike to be found in his pages. It is the story put into the mouth of Boots at the Holly Tree. Accept the fantasy, and these little actors are wonderfully well shown; their talk is true, their behaviour—down to the crossness of the bride-elect when she gets tired—

as truly observed as it is mirth-provoking. No wonder that Boots at the Holly Tree was one of the "readings" most acceptable to Dickens's audience. If he must needs read in public, he could not have chosen a piece more likely to keep sweet his personal memory with those who heard him.

CHAPTER VIII

HUMOUR AND PATHOS

To write of Dickens at all, is to presuppose his humour. The plan of my essay has necessitated a separate consideration of the various features of his work, and at moments it may have appeared that I found fault without regard to a vast counterbalance; but it was never possible for me to lose sight of that supreme quality of his genius which must be now dwelt upon with undivided attention. It was as a humorist that Dickens made his name; and in a retrospect of his life's activity one perceives that his most earnest purposes depended for their furtherance upon this genial power, which he shares with nearly all the greatest of English writers. Holding, as he did, that the first duty of an author is to influence his reader for good, Dickens necessarily esteemed as the most precious of his gifts that by virtue of which he commanded so great an audience. Without his humour, he might have been a vigorous advocate of social reform, but as a novelist assuredly he would have failed; and as to the advocacy of far-reaching reforms by men who have only earnestness and eloquence to work with, English history tells its tale. Only because they laughed with him so heartily, did

multitudes of people turn to discussing the question his page suggested. As a story-teller pure and simple, the powers that remain to him, if humour be subtracted, would never have ensured popularity. Nor, on the other hand, would they have availed him in the struggle for artistic perfection, which is a better thing. Humour is the soul of his work. Like the soul of man, it permeates a living fabric which, but for its creative breath, could never have existed.

In his earliest writing we discover only the suggestion of this quality. The *Sketches* have a touch of true humour, but (apart from the merits of acute observation and great descriptive power) there is much more of merely youthful high spirits, tending to the farcical. Such a piece as *The Tuggs's at Ramsgate* is distinct farce, and not remarkably good of its kind. This vein Dickens continued to work throughout his career, and often with great success. One must distinguish between the parts of his writing which stir to mere hilarity, and his humour in the strict sense of the word. It is none of my business to define that term, which has long ago been adequately expounded; enough that the humorist has by no means invariably a chuckle in his throat; at moments of his supreme success, he will hardly move us to more of merriment than appears in a thoughtful smile. But there is a perfectly legitimate, and tolerably wide, range

for the capers of a laughing spirit, and as a writer of true farce I suppose Dickens has never been surpassed. *Pickwick* abounds in it, now quite distinct from, and now all but blending with, the higher characteristic. One can imagine that the public approval of his *Sketches* had given the author an impetus which carried him of a sudden into regions of extravagant buoyancy and mirthfulness. The first few pages are farce of the frankest. Winkle, Snodgrass, and Tupman remain throughout farcical characters, but not so Mr. Pickwick himself. Farce is the election at Eatanswill, and the quarrel of the rival Editors, and many another well-remembered passage. Only a man of genius has the privilege of being so emphatically young. "Though the merriment was rather boisterous, still it came from the heart and not from the lips; and this is the right sort of merriment after all." How could one better describe, than in these words from the book itself, that overflowing cheeriness which conquered Dickens's first public! Or take the description of old Wardle coming through the early sunshine to bid Mr. Pickwick good morning,—"out of breath with his own anticipations of pleasure". Alas! old gentlemen, however jolly, do not get breathless in this fashion; but the young may, and Dickens, a mere boy himself, was writing for the breathless boyhood of many an age to come.

The farce in his younger work always results from this exuberance of spirits; later, he introduces it deliberately; with conscious art—save perhaps at those moments when the impulse of satire is too much for him. One easily recalls his best efforts in this direction. The wild absurdity of the Muffin Company at the beginning of *Nickleby* shows him still in his boyish mood, and the first chapter of *Chuzzlewit* finds him unluckily reverting to it at the moment when he was about to produce a masterpiece of genuine humour. Mr. Mantalini is capital fun; he never quite loses his hold upon one, and to the end we shall laugh over the "demnition egg" and the "demnition bow-wows". At this stage Dickens was capable of a facetiousness of descriptive phrase which hints the peril involved in a reputation such as he had won. "Madame Mantalini wrung her hands for grief and rung the bell for her husband; which done, she fell into a chair and a fainting fit simultaneously." When he had written that passage, and allowed it to stand, his genius warned him; I remember nothing so dangerous in after-time. Quilp, at his best, is rich entertainment; in Dick Swiveller we touch higher things. The scene between little David Copperfield and the waiter (chapter v) seems to me farce, though very good; country innkeepers were never in the habit of setting a dish-load of cutlets before a little boy who wanted dinner, and not even the

shrewdest of waiters, having devoured them all, could make people believe that it was the little boy's achievement; but the comic vigour of the thing is irresistible. Better still is the forced marriage of Jack Bunsby to the great MacStinger. Here, I think, Dickens reaches his highest point. We cannot call it "screaming" farce; it appeals not only to the groundlings. Laughter holding both his sides was never more delightfully justified; gall and the megrims were never more effectually dispelled. It is the ludicrous in its purest form, tainted by no sort of unkindliness, and leaving behind it nothing but the wholesome aftertaste of self-forgetful mirth.

We may notice how Dickens makes use of farcical extravagance to soften the bitterness of truth. When Sally Brass goes down into the grimy cellar-kitchen to give the little slavey her food, we are told that she cut from the joint "two square inches of cold mutton", and bade her victim never say that she had not had meat in *that* house. This makes one laugh; who can refrain? If he had avoided exaggeration, and shown us the ragged, starving child swallowing the kind of meal which was really set before her, who could have endured it? The point is vastly important for an understanding of Dickens's genius and his popularity. That "two square inches" makes all the difference between painful realism and fiction universally acceptable; it is

the secret of Dickens's power for good. Beside it may be set another instance. Judy Smallweed, in *Bleak House*, likewise has her little slavey over whom she tyrannizes; a child, too, who has won our sympathy in a high degree, and whom we could not bear to see brutally used. She *is* brutally used; but then Judy Smallweed is a comical figure; so comical that no one takes her doings with seriousness. Harsh words and broken meats are again provocative of laughter, when in very truth we should sob. With Dickens's end in view, how wise his method! After merriment comes the thought: "But what a shame!" And henceforth the reader thinks sympathetically of poor little girls, whether ruled by vicious trollops or working under easier conditions. Omit the jest—and the story becomes too unpleasant to remember.

Between Dickens's farce and his scenes of humour the difference is obvious. In Mantalini or Jack Bunsby we have nothing illuminative; they amuse, and there the matter ends. But true humour always suggests a thought, always throws light on human nature. The humorist may not be fully conscious of his own meaning; he always, indeed, implies more than he can possibly have thought out; and therefore it is that we find the best humour inexhaustible, ever fresh when we return to it, ever, as our knowledge of life increases, more suggestive of wisdom.

Both the Wellers are creations strictly humorous. For one thing, each is socially representative; each, moreover, is a human type, for ever recognizable beneath time's disguises. Be it noticed that neither the old coachman nor his son is ever shown in a grotesque, or improbable, situation; there is no cutting of capers, even when they make us laugh the loudest. The fantastic is here needless; nature has wrought with roguish intention, and we are aware of it at every moment of their common life. No one takes Mantalini to his heart; but Tony and Sam become in very truth our friends, and for knowing them, improbable as it might seem, we know ourselves the better. They are surprising incarnations of the spirit of man, which is doomed to inhabit so variously. The joke consists in perceiving how this spirit adjusts itself to an odd situation, reconciles itself with queerest circumstance. In old Weller, it is a matter of stress; his difficulties, never too severe, bring out the quaint philosophy of the man, and set us smiling in fellowship. Sam, at ease in the world, makes life his jest, and we ask nothing better than to laugh with one who sees so shrewdly, feels so honestly. Sam cannot away with a humbug—in this respect, Dickens's own child. Put him face to face with Job Trotter, and how his countenance shines, how his tongue is loosed! It is a great part of Sam's business in life to come into genial conflict

with Job Trotter; his weapon of mockery is in the end irresistible, and a Cockney serving-man strikes many a stroke for the good of humankind. Of course he does not know it; that is our part, as we look on, and feel in our hearts the warmth of kindly merriment, and give thanks to the great humorist who teaches us so much.

To survey all his humorous characters would be to repeat, in substance, the same remarks again and again. I have no space for a discussion, from this point of view, of the figures which have already passed before us. But of Mrs. Gamp one word. She sometimes comes into my thought together with Falstaff, and I am tempted to say that there is a certain propriety in the association. Where else since Shakespeare shall we find such force in the humorous presentment of gross humanity? The two figures, of course, stand on different planes. In Falstaff, intellect and breeding are at issue with the flesh, however sorely worsted; in Sarah Gamp, little intellect and less breeding are to be looked for, and the flesh has its way; but I discover some likeness of character. If Betsy Prig's awful assertion regarding Mrs. Harris must be held as proved, is there not a hint of resemblance between the mood that elaborated this delicious fiction and the temper native to the hero of Gadshill? A fancy; let it pass. But to my imagination the thick-tongued, leering, yet half-genial woman walks as

palpably in Kingsgate Street as yon mountain of a man in Eastcheap. The literary power exhibited in one and the other portrait is of the same kind; the same perfect method of idealism is put to use in converting to a source of pleasure things that in life repel or nauseate; and in both cases the sublimation of character, of circumstance, is effected by a humour which seems unsurpassable.

From a mention of Mrs. Harris, one passes very naturally to Spenlow and Jorkins—an only less happy bit of humour. Of course it was taken straight from life; we know that without any authority; at this moment, be sure of it, more than one Mr. Spenlow is excusing his necessity or his meanness with the plea of Mr. Jorkins's inflexibility. But only the man of genius notes such a thing, and records it for ever among human traits.

Very rich is Dickens's humour in those passages which serve rather as illustrations of manners than of individual character. Take the scene at Mrs. Kenwigs's confinement—a shining chapter in the often weak and crude pages of *Nickleby*. So quietly it is done, yet so vividly; never a note of the extravagant; every detail of the scene set before us as it must have been shown in fact, but invested with such mirthful significance. Or, again, the servants' hall at Mr. Dombey's; so much better, because done with

so much more geniality, than the life that went on upstairs. Or Mr. Guppy giving his friend Jobling a dinner at the chop-house; where we hear the chink of plates and glasses, and feel hungry at Jobling's acceptance of each new succulent suggestion, and see the law-clerk's wink as he reckons up with Polly the waitress. Among things supreme stands "Todgers's". Whenever I chance to come within sight of the Monument, it is not of the fire of London that I think, but of Todgers's; one feels that the house must be still existing, discoverable by sufficiently earnest search. It is inconceivable that any age which has not outgrown our language should forget this priceless description: every line close-packed with humorous truth. And how generous the scale! Here is no "hitting off" in a page or so; a broad canvas filled with detail that never tires, and no touch ever superfluous. Not only are the inhabitants of Todgers's made real to us, collectively and individually, by the minutest portraiture; but the very building and its furniture fix themselves in the mind, so described that each room, each table, becomes symbolic, instinct with a meaning which the ordinary observer would never have suspected. The grim old city of London has of a sudden revealed to us a bit of its very self, and we see in it a museum of human peculiarities, foibles, and vices. There this little group of people lives

squeezed amid the brick-and-mortar labyrinth; each so vastly important to himself, so infinitesimal in the general view. They remind us of busy ants, running about with what seems such ridiculous earnestness; yet we know that their concerns are ours, and turn from laughing at them—to go and do likewise.

The subtlest bit of humour in all Dickens's books is, to my mind, that scene I have already mentioned as a triumph of characterization, the Father of the Marshalsea entertaining his old pensioner Nandy. But public favour turns to pictures of life that have more familiarity. Dickens was always happy when dealing with that common object of his time—nothing like so common nowadays—the travelling show: were it dramatic or equestrian, waxworks or Punch and Judy. From Mr. Crummles and his troupe in *Nickleby* down to Chops the Dwarf in a story written for *All the Year Round*, he never failed in such humorous picturing. Codlin and Short are typical instances. These figures never become farcical; they are always profoundly true, and amuse by pure virtue of their humanity. Akin to this order of beings is another with which he had remarkable acquaintance—the inn waiter. Read again (or only too possibly read for the first time) the waiter's autobiography in *Somebody's Luggage*. Here is no satire, but very fact made vocal; made, at the same time, such a delightful

example of unconscious self-disclosure that we cannot sufficiently wonder at the author's sympathetic knowledge.

No one has equalled him in bringing out the humours of stupidity. One of his masterpieces is old Willet, the landlord of the Maypole. Willet is all but a born idiot, in the proper sense of the word; and that "all but" becomes in Dickens's hand the opportunity for elaborate portraiture. You may compare the man with the weakest-minded of Dickens's lower-class women (whichever that may be), and find in the parallel a rich subject of speculation. Being masculine, Willet is sparing of his words; his great resource is a blank stare of imbecile resentment, implying an estimate of his own importance at which the very gods might stand fixed between amaze and laughter. Inimitable the skill with which this asserter of human dignity is shown at last suffering from mental shock—a shock so severe that it almost reduces him to the condition of a deaf-mute. We had thought it impossible that he could fall intellectually lower; when it comes, we can only acknowledge the author's reserve of power. There he sits, amid the wreck of his fine old inn, staring at his old-time companion, the kitchen boiler. Seeing him thus, we have it brought to mind that he really was, in his way, a capable landlord, and had kept the Maypole spick and span for many a long year; which possibly

suggests an aspect of English character, and English conservatism, not out of keeping with some of Dickens's views on such subjects.

I must not omit mention of those sketches of genuine grotesques—not Quilp-like extravagances—which now and then flash upon us at some odd moment of the story: wonders of swift character-drawing, and instinct with humour. The finest examples I can remember are the figure of Mr. Nadgett, in *Chuzzlewit* (chap. xxvii), and that of the old woman called Tamaroo, in the same book (chap. xxxii). Language cannot do more in the calling up of a vivid image before the mind; and this result is mainly traceable to the writer's humorous insight. There could be no better illustration of the difference between Dickens's grasp and presentment of a bit of human nature, a bit of observable fact, and that method which the critics of to-day, inaccurately but intelligibly, call photographic. Nadgett, the tracker of sordid mysteries, and Tamaroo, successor of young Bailey at Todgers's, acquire an imaginative importance like in kind (however different in degree) to that of the grandest figures in fiction. Every stroke of such outlines is a manifestation of genius.

Inseparable from the gift of humour is that of pathos. It was Dickens's misfortune that, owing to habits of his mind already sufficiently discussed, he sometimes elaborated pathetic *scenes*, in the theatrical sense of the word. I do not attribute to

him the cold insincerity so common in the work of playwrights; but at times he lost self-restraint and unconsciously responded to the crude ideals of a popular audience. Emphasis and iteration, however necessary for such hearers, were out of place in pathetic narrative. Thus it comes about that he is charged with mawkishness, and we hear of some who greatly enjoy his humour rapidly turning the pages meant to draw a tear. Chiefly, I suppose, it is the death of Paul Dombey that such critics have in mind; they would point also to the death of Jo, the crossing-sweeper, and to that of little Nell. On a re-perusal of these chapters, I feel that nothing can be said in defence of Jo; on his death-bed he is an impossible creature, and here for once moral purpose has been undeniably fatal to every quality of art. Regarding the other narratives, it strikes me that they have been too hastily condemned. The one line which describes the death of Paul's mother is better, no doubt, than the hundreds through which we follow the fading of Paul himself; but these pages I cannot call mawkish, for I do not feel that they are flagrantly untrue. The tear may rise or not—that depends upon how we are constituted—but we are really standing by the bed of a gentle little child, precociously gifted and cruelly overwrought, and, if the situation is to be presented at all, it might be much worse done. Such pathos is called "cheap". I can

only repeat that in Dickens's day, the lives, the happiness of children were very cheap indeed, and that he had his purpose in insisting on their claims to attention. As for the heroine of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, distaste for her as a pathetic figure seems to me unintelligent. She is a child of romance; her death is purely symbolical, signifying the premature close of any sweet, innocent, and delicate life. Heaven forbid that I should attribute to Dickens a deliberate allegory; but, having in mind those hapless children who were then being tortured in England's mines and factories, I like to see in Little Nell a type of their sufferings; she, the victim of avarice, dragged with bleeding feet along the hard roads, ever pursued by heartless self-interest, and finding her one safe refuge in the grave. Look back upon the close of that delightful novel, and who can deny its charm? Something I shall have to say presently about the literary style; but as a story of peaceful death it is beautifully imagined and touchingly told.

Of true pathos Dickens has abundance. The earliest instance I can call to mind is the death of the Chancery prisoner in *Pickwick*, described at no great length, but very powerful over the emotions. It worthily holds a place amid the scenes of humour enriching that part of the book. We feel intensely the contrast between the prisoner's life and that which was

going on in the free world only a few yards away; we see in his death a pitifulness beyond words. A scene in another book,—*Bleak House*,—this, too, connected with that accursed system of imprisonment for debt, shows Dickens at his best in bringing out the pathos of child-life. The man known to Mr. Skimpole as "Coavinses" has died, and Coavinses' children, viewed askance by neighbours because of their father's calling, are living alone in a garret. They are presented as simply as possible—nothing here of stage emphasis—yet the eyes dazzle as we look. I must quote a line or two. "We were looking at one another," says Esther Summerson, "and at these two children, when there came into the room a very little girl, childish in figure but shrewd and older-looking in the face—pretty faced too—wearing a womanly sort of bonnet much too large for her, and drying her bare arms on a womanly sort of apron. Her fingers were white and wrinkled with washing, and the soap-suds were yet smoking which she wiped off her arms. But for this, she might have been a child playing at washing and imitating a poor working-woman with a quick observation of the truth." It is Charley, of course, who had found a way to support herself and the younger ones. We see how closely the true pathetic and a "quick observation" are allied. Another picture shown us in Esther's narrative, that of the baby's death in the starved labourer's

cottage, moves by legitimate art. Still more of it is felt in the story of Doctor Marigold, the Cheap-Jack, whose child is dying in his arms, whilst for daily bread he plays buffoon before the crowd. This is a noble piece of work, and defies criticism. The tale is told by the man himself as simply as possible; he never insists upon the pitifulness of his position. We hear his whispers to the child, between his hoarse professional shoutings and the guffaws in front; then he finds his word of tenderness brings no response—he looks closer—he turns from the platform. A piece of work that might atone for literary sins far worse than Dickens ever committed.

Little Dorrit is strong in pathos, as in humour. Dickens's memories of childhood made his touch very sure whenever he dealt with the squalid prison-world, and life there was for him no less fertile in pathos than death. Very often it is inextricably blended with his humour; in the details of the Marshalsea picture, who shall say which element of his genius prevails? Yet, comparing it with the corresponding scenes in *Pickwick*, we perceive a subdual of tone, which comes not only of advancing years, but of riper art; and as we watch the Dorrits step forth from the prison door, it is another mood than that which accompanied the release of Mr. Pickwick. Pathos of this graver and subtler kind is the distinguishing note of *Great Expectations*, a book

which Dickens meant, and rightly meant, to end in the minor key. The old convict, Magwitch, if he cannot be called a tragical personality, has feeling enough to move the reader's deeper interest, and in the very end acquires through suffering a dignity which makes him very impressive. Rightly seen, is there not much pathos in the story of Pip's foolishness? It would be more manifest if we could forget Lytton's imbecile suggestion, and restore the original close of the story.

To the majority of readers it seemed—and perhaps still seems—that Dickens achieved his best pathos in the Christmas books. Two of those stories answered their purpose admirably; the other two showed a flagging spirit; but not even in the *Carol* can we look for anything to be seriously compared with the finer features of his novels. The true value of these little books lies in their deliberate illustration of a theme which occupied Dickens's mind from first to last. Writing for the season of peace, good-will, and jollity, he sets himself to exhibit these virtues in an idealization of the English home. The type of domestic beauty he finds, as a matter of course, beneath a humble roof. And we have but to glance in memory through the many volumes of his life's work to recognize that his gentlest, brightest humour, his simplest pathos, occur in those unexciting pages which depict the every-

day life of poor and homely English folk. This is Dickens's most delightful aspect, and I believe it is the most certainly enduring portion of what he has left us.

His genius plays like a warm light on the characteristic aspects of homely England. No man ever loved England more; and the proof of it remains in picture after picture of her plain, old-fashioned life—in wayside inns and cottages, in little dwellings hidden amid the city's vastness and tumult, in queer musty shops, in booths and caravans. Finding comfort or jollity, he enjoys it beyond measure, he rubs his hands, he sparkles, he makes us laugh with him from the very heart. Coming upon hardship and woe, he is moved as nowhere else, holds out the hand of true brotherhood, tells to the world his indignation and his grief. There would be no end of selecting passages in illustration, but we must recall a few for the mere pleasure of the thing. Try to imagine the warmest welcome of a cosy little inn, at the end of a long lonely road, on a night of foul weather; you must needs have recourse to the Jolly Sandboys, where Nell and her grandfather and the wandering showmen all found shelter. "There was a deep ruddy blush upon the room, and when the landlord stirred the fire, sending the flames skipping and leaping up—when he took off the lid of the iron pot, and there rushed out a savoury smell, while the

bubbling sound grew deeper and more rich, and an unctuous steam came floating out, hanging in a delicious mist above their heads—when he did this, Mr. Codlin's heart was touched" (*Old Curiosity Shop*, chap. xxviii). And whose is not? What dyspeptic exquisite but must laugh with appetite over such a description?

As good is the picture of Ruth Pinch at the butcher's. "To see him slap the steak before he laid it on the block, and give his knife a sharpening, was to forget breakfast instantly. It was agreeable, too,—it really was—to see him cut it off, so smooth and juicy. There was nothing savage in the act. Although the knife was large and keen, it was a piece of high art. . . . Perhaps the greenest cabbage-leaf ever grown in a garden was wrapped about this steak before it was delivered over to Tom. But the butcher had a sentiment for his business, and knew how to refine upon it. When he saw Tom putting the cabbage-leaf into his pocket awkwardly, he begged to be allowed to do it for him; 'for meat', he said with some emotion, 'must be humoured and not drove'!" (*Chuzzlewit*, chap. xxxix). Reading this, how does one regret that Dickens should have filled with melodrama many a page which might have been given to the commonest doings of the humble street!

There is a great chapter of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (chap. xxxix), where Kit and Barbara, with

their respective mothers, with little Jacob, too, and the Baby, go to spend the evening at Astley's. It would have seemed impossible to get so much kindly fun out of a group of the London poor. Dickens does it by dint of his profound, his overflowing sympathy with them. He glows with delight when *they* are delighted; he understands precisely what they enjoy, and why; it does his very soul good to hear Kit's guffaws and the screaming laugh of little Jacob. Where else in literature is there such infinite good-feeling expressed with such wondrous whimsicality? After the circus, Kit takes all his companions to have an oyster supper (by the way, in those days, as Sam Weller assures us, poverty and oysters always went together). And not one of them enjoyed the meal more than he who gaily described it. How the London poor should love Dickens! But—with his books always obtainable—they can scarce be said to read him at all.

Remember that such a scene as this was *new* in literature, a bold innovation. Dickens had no model to imitate when he sat down to tell of the joys of servant-lads and servant-girls with their washerwomen and sempstress mothers. But in spirit he continues the work of two writers whom he always held dear, Goldsmith and Sterne. Goldsmith's sweetness and compassion, Sterne's sensitive humanity, necessarily had their part,

and that no small one, in forming Dickens. There is a foretaste of his humour in Moses ("Boz", as we know), the son of the Vicar of Wakefield, and in the would-be fine company; there is a palpable hint to him in the Vicar preaching among poor prisoners. Turning to Uncle Toby, to Corporal Trim, we are perforce reminded of those examples of grotesque goodness, of sweet humility under the oddest exteriors, upon which Dickens lavished his humour and his love.

Captain Cuttle is as well known as any of them. In what terms of literary criticism shall one describe that scene (*Dombey*, chap. xlix) where the Captain sits in Solomon Gills's parlour and Florence mixes his grog for him? It is a sort of fairy tale of modern life. No one can for a moment believe that two such persons ever were in such relations; but so irrelevant an objection never occurs to us. All we know is, that a spell is laid upon us; that we pass from smiles to laughter, and from laughter to smiles again. Who ever paused to think that the old coasting Captain, Mrs. MacStinger's lodger, must have been in person and manners and speech not a little repulsive to a young lady straight from a great house in the west of London? It is not germane to the matter. These are actors in the world of humour and imagination, raised above the inessentials of life. Dickens's thought was to

make a picture delightful to every heart which can enjoy fun, respect innocence, and sympathize with kindness. Moreover, he wished to point a contrast between the stately house, inhabited by wealth and pride, the atmosphere of which had grown poisonous from the evil passions nurtured in it; and the little back parlour of a shop somewhere amid the City's noisiest streets, where the homeliest—and therefore the most precious—virtues have a secure abode. Fleeing from the home that is none, the mansion where her womanly instincts have been outraged, Florence betakes herself to this poor haven of refuge, and lives there guarded and honoured as any queen in her palace. What could make stronger appeal to the sensibilities of English readers? No national foible is here concerned: we respond with the very best that is in us. We feel that these are the ideals of English life. We are proud of the possibility underlying a fancy of such irresistible charm.

For his own fame, Dickens, I think, never puts his genius to better use than in the idealization of English life and character. Whatever in his work may be of doubtful interest to future time, here is its enduring feature. To be truly and profoundly national is great strength in the maker of literature. What a vast difference from all but every point of view between Dickens and Tennyson; yet it is likely enough that these

two may survive together as chosen writers of the Victorian age. They are at one in their English sentiment. They excite the same emotion whenever they speak of the English home; none, I think, of their contemporaries touches so powerfully that island note. In Tennyson's glorious range, humour is not lacking; it exercises itself on a theme of the most intimately national significance, and his Northern Farmer will live as long as the poet's memory. Of humour the very incarnation, Dickens cannot think of his country without a sunny smile. In our hearts we love him for it, and so, surely, will the island people for many an age to come.

CHAPTER IX

STYLE

Dickens is one of the masters of prose, but in a sense that carries qualification. He cannot be compared with Thackeray for flow of pure idiom, for command of subtle melodies. He is often mannered to the last point of endurance; he has one fault which offends the prime law of prose composition. For all that, he made unique use of the English language, and his style must be examined as one of the justifications of his place in literature.

In the beginning it had excellent qualities; his *Sketches* are phrased with vigour, with variety, and with a soundness of construction which he owed to his eighteenth-century studies. Dealing for the most part with vulgarity, his first book is very free from vulgarisms. In one of the earliest letters to Forster, he speaks of "your invite"; but no such abomination deforms his printed pages. Facetiousness is now and then to blame for an affected sentence, and this fault once or twice crops up in later books. Someone in *Pickwick* wears "a grin which agitated his countenance from one auricular organ to the other"; and in *Bleak House*, when grandfather

Smallweed threw his cushion at the old woman, we are told that "the effect of this act of jaculation was twofold". Without much effort Dickens kept clear of such pitfalls; what *might* have befallen him but for his fine models and his good sense, we may surmise from the style of certain of his more or less conscious imitators. Slovenly English he never wrote; the nature of the man made it impossible. And in this respect he contrasts remarkably with all save the greatest of his day. As an illustration of what a generally sound writer could permit himself in the hurry of writing a "mere novel", I remember a passage in Henry Kingsley's *Ravenshoe* (chap. xxviii), where a dog is trying to attract his master's attention; we read, with a little shock of surprise, that "the dog wagged his tail and pawed his waistcoat". But Dickens respected both himself and his public—never a common virtue in the everyday English novelist.

The gravest of his faults, from *Oliver Twist* onwards—and he never wholly overcame it—is the habit of writing metrically. He is not alone in this vice. Charles Kingsley illustrates it very badly in some of his prose; especially, I remember, in the *Heroes*. Should any one wish to see how far the trick (unconsciously, of course) can be carried, let him open Richard Jefferies' paper "The Open Air", where he will find several pages written, with very few breaks, precisely in

a metre made familiar by Longfellow. As thus: "All the devious brooklet's sweetness | where the iris stays the sunlight; | all the wild woods hold of beauty: | all the broad hills' thyme and freedom: | thrice a hundred years repeated". This, of course, betrays an ear untrained in the harmonies of prose; the worst of it is, that many readers would discover it with delight, and point to it as admirable. A good many years since, I came upon a magazine article entitled "Dickens as a Poet", the absurd aim whereof was to show admiringly how many passages from the novels could be written and read as blank verse. The fact unfortunately cannot be disputed. Dickens wrote thus under the influence of strong emotion. He observed the tendency, speaks of it as something he cannot help, and is not disturbed by it. The habit overcame him in his moods of softness; and therefore is particularly noticeable towards the end of the *Old Curiosity Shop*. When his emotion is indignant, on the other hand, he is not thus tempted; simply as a bit of prose, the paragraph giving a general description of the children at Dotheboys, is good, well-balanced, with no out-of-place rhythm. But turn to a passage quoted by Forster (Book iii, chap. 8) from the *American Notes*; quoted as a fine expression of Dickens's sympathy with the poor. It is nobly felt, most admirably worded; yet the five-foot cadence is flagrant here and there.

"But bring him here, upon this crowded deck. | Strip from his fair young wife her silken dress | . . . . pinch her pale cheek with care and much privation"—and so on. One is half inclined to think that Dickens did it deliberately, regarding it as an improvement on plain prose.

For a style simple, direct, and forcible, one may turn to *Barnaby Rudge*. Taking it all in all, this is perhaps the best written of his novels; best, that is to say, in the sense of presenting the smoothest and closest strain of narrative. There are no irruptions of metre; the periods are flowing, the language is full of subdued energy. Among the first few books it is very noticeable for this peculiar excellence. One reason, possibly, is its comparative shortness. *Nickleby*, on the other hand, has faults of style plainly due to the necessity of writing more than the author wished to say. One of its best-knit chapters is that describing Nicholas's walk from London through Surrey, with Smike. We breathe the very air of the downs, and smell the sweetness of wayside hedges. This power of suggesting a country atmosphere is remarkable in Dickens. He hardly ever mentions a tree or flower by its name; he never elaborates—perhaps never even sketches—a landscape; yet we see and feel the open-air surroundings. The secret is his own delight in the road and the meadow,

and his infinite power of suggestion in seemingly unconsidered words.

In narrative, he is always excellent when describing rapid journeys. The best coach-drive ever put into words is that of the Muggleton coach, in *Pickwick*. It surpasses the much longer description in *Chuzzlewit*, which comes near to being monotonous after many paragraphs beginning with the same words; it is incredibly exhilarating, and would put a healthy glow, as of a fine frosty morning, into the veins of a man languishing in the tropics. We are asked to believe that the story (in *Bleak House*) of the posting journey conducted by Inspector Bucket, came from the pen of Miss Esther Summerson; the brain, at all events, was Dickens's, and working with its most characteristic vigour. He knew every stage covered by the travellers; he saw the gleam of the lamps, the faces they illumined but for a moment; the very horses brought out fresh were his old acquaintances. Such writing is no mere question of selecting and collocating words; there must first be vision, and that of extraordinary clearness. Dickens tells us that in times of worry or of grave trouble he could still write; he had but to sit down at his desk, and straightway he *saw*. Where—as would happen—he saw untruly, a mere fantasm thrown forward by the mind, his hand at once had lost its cunning. When vision was but a subtly enhanced

memory, he never lacked the skill to make it seen by others.

Think of the easy graphic power that Dickens possessed, and compare it for a moment with the results of such laborious effort to the same ends as was put forth by the French novelist Flaubert. On the one hand, here is a man who works hard indeed, and methodically, but whose work is ever a joy to him, and not seldom a rapture. On the other, we have growls and groans; toil advancing at snail's pace, whilst sweat drips from the toiler's brow; little or no satisfaction to him in the end from all his suffering. And not one page of Flaubert gives proof of sight and grasp equal to that evinced in a thousand of Dickens. This thing cometh not by prayer and fasting, nor by any amount of thinking about art. You have it or you have it not. As a boy or youth Dickens was occupied in *seeing*; as a young man he took his pen and began to write of what he had seen. And the world saw with him—much better than with its own poor, purblind eyes.

In the story of David Copperfield's journey on the Dover road, we have as good a piece of narrative prose as can be found in English. Equally as good, in another way, are those passages of rapid retrospect, in which David tells us of his later boyhood; a concentration of memory perfumed with the sweetest humour. It is not an easy thing to relate with perfect

proportion of detail, with interest that never for a moment drops, the course of a year or two of wholly uneventful marriage; but read the chapter entitled "Our Domestic Life" and try to award adequate praise to the great artist who composed it. One can readily suggest how the chapter might have been spoiled; ever so little undue satire, ever so little excess of sentiment; but who can point to a line in which it might be bettered? It is perfect writing; one can say no more and no less.

Another kind of descriptive writing appears in the nineteenth chapter of *Chuzzlewit*: the funeral of old Anthony conducted by Mr. Mould. What of the scope declared in a contrast of this chapter with the one in *Copperfield* just mentioned? I should not like to say that one excels the other; I should find it impossible to decide between their merits. Where is the "extravagance" which, we are told, has pronounced Dickens's doom? Mr. Mould and his retainers, the whole funeral from house to grave, seems to me realism of the finest; it is clearest vision and narrative, without a hint of effort; and there stands the thing for ever.

A fine piece of the grimly picturesque is Quilp's death. Better, because more human, is the narrative in *Barnaby Rudge* of the day and night before the gaol-delivery when the rioters are to be hung. It has the effect of rapidity, but contains an immense amount of detail, actual and imaginative.

Dennis, Hugh, and Barnaby, together in their cell, are seen by us as the swift hours pass, and at the same time we know what is going on without. Of all the broad and the delicate touches in which these pages abound, not one could be omitted as superfluous; and the impression aimed at is obtained with absolute success.

Narrative, of course, includes description; but in description by itself and in elaborate picturing, as distinguished from the hints which so often serve his purpose, Dickens is very strong. Before speaking of the familiar instances let me mention that chapter at the beginning of *Little Dorrit*, which opens with a picture of London as seen on a gloomy Sunday—if the phrase be not tautological. It is very curious reading. For once we have Dickens quite divested of his humour, and beholding the great city in something like a splenetic mood. As conveying an impression, the passage could not be better; it makes us feel precisely what one has felt times innumerable amid the black lifeless houses, under a sky that crushes the spirit. But seldom indeed can Dickens have seen and felt thus. Compare with it his picture of the fog—Mr. Guppy's "London particular"—at the opening of *Bleak House*. This darkness visible makes one rather cheerful than otherwise, for we are spectators in the company of a man who allows nothing to balk his enjoyment of life, and who can jest unaffectedly

even in such circumstances. Those few pages of *Little Dorrit*, admirable as art, suggest the kind of novels Dickens might have written without his humour. But in that case he would not have written them at all.

His normal manner is seen in the description of the Fleet, in *Pickwick*. It would appear difficult to make a vivid picture of such a place, a picture which convinces, and yet to omit things vile or intolerable to the feelings; but here it is done. The same art manifests itself as in his masterpieces of characterization; something is obscured, nothing falsified. At times, he could make a sketch in what is known as the impressionist manner; rapid, strong, and in the broadest lines suggesting a vast amount of detail; as in the description of the Gordon rioters seen, passing in their drunken fury along the street, from an upper window (*Barnaby*, chapter L). Dickens was rather proud of this passage; he calls attention to it in a letter written at the time. Innumerable the aspects of London presented in his books; what a wonderful little volume might be made by collecting such passages! Of the West-end we have glimpses only; one remembers, however, that very genteel but stuffy corner inhabited by the house of Barnacle, and the similar locality where dwelt Miss Tox. Stately and wealthy London he does not show us; his artistic preference is for the quaint, out-of-the-way quarters,

or for the grim and the lurid, out of which he made a picturesque of his own. Writing once from Naples (where he was merely disappointed and disgusted, we can see why), he says, "I am afraid the conventional idea of the picturesque is associated with such misery and degradation that a new picturesque will have to be established as the world goes onward". Conventional his own ideas and presentments certainly were not, but for the most part they *are* closely connected with misery and degradation. Jacob's Island and Tom-all-alone's have the affect of fine, wild etchings lighted only just sufficiently to show broad features and suggest details one does not desire to pry into. Krook's house and its surroundings make an essential part of the world shadowed by Chancery; unutterably foul and stifling, yet so shown as to hold the imagination in no painful way. Dickens views such scenes in a romantic light. It is the property of his genius to perceive romance in the commonplace and the squalid, no less than in clean and comfortable homeliness.

What he can make out of a wretched little room a few feet square, in a close-packed, sordid neighbourhood, is shown in chapter xlvi of *Chuzzlewit*. Jonas, become a murderer, is lurking in his own house, and chooses a corner of it where he is not likely to be observed. "The room in which he had shut himself up was on the ground-floor,

at the back of the house. It was lighted by a dirty sky-light, and had a door in the wall, opening into a narrow, covered passage or blind alley. . . . It was a blotched, stained, mouldering room, like a vault; and there were water-pipes running through it, which, at unexpected times in the night, when other things were quiet, clicked and gurgled suddenly, as if they were choking." Nothing could be more insignificant, and at the same time more grim. An out-of-doors companion to it may be found in *Great Expectations*. "I came into Smithfield; the shameful place, being all filth and fat and blood and foam, seemed to stick to me. So I rubbed it off with all possible speed by turning into a street where I saw the great black dome of St. Paul's bulging at me from behind a grim stone building which a bystander said was Newgate Prison. Following the wall of the jail, I found the roadway covered with straw to deaden the sound of passing vehicles; and from the quantity of people standing about, smelling strongly of spirits and beer, I inferred that the trials were on" (chap. xx). This is "locality" as good as the bit of human portraiture which follows (Mr. Jaggers walking through the throng of his clients); and higher praise could not be bestowed.

I suppose there is no English writer, perhaps no writer in any literature, who so often gives proof of wonderfully minute observation. It is

an important source of his strength; it helps him to put people and things before us more clearly than, as a rule, we should ourselves see them. Two examples only can I find room for; but they will suffice. Peggotty's purse, given to little David on his departure from Yarmouth, was found to contain "three bright shillings, which Peggotty had evidently polished up with whiting for my greater delight". And again, little Pip, after being washed by his sister, is led to make the remark: "I suppose myself to be better acquainted than any living authority with the ridgy effect of a wedding-ring, passing unsympathetically over the human countenance". You will come across no such instances as these in any other novelist, of observation, memory, and imaginative force, all evinced in a touch of detail so indescribably trivial; its very triviality being the proof of power in one who could so choose for his purposes among the neglected incidents of life.

When Dickens writes in his pleasantest mood of things either pleasant in themselves, or especially suggestive of humorous reflection, his style is faultless; perfectly suited, that is to say, to the author's aim and to the matter in hand. His Christmas number called *The Holly Tree* begins with a chapter on Inns; we rise from it feeling that on that subject the last word has been said, and said in the best possible way.

His book of collected papers, *The Uncommercial Traveller*, consists almost wholly of such writing. Whether its theme is City of London Churches, or Shy Neighbourhoods, Tramps, or Night-walks, or London Chambers, he is invariably happy in phrase, and in flow of language which, always easy, never falls below the level of literature. In such work he must be put beside the eighteenth-century essayists, whom he always had in mind. His English is not less idiomatic than theirs, and his views of life find no less complete expression through the medium of a style so lightly and deftly handled.

CHAPTER X

THE RADICAL

Dickens's superabounding energy, and the unrest which frequently came upon him in consequence of private worries, now and then diverted his thoughts from the all-sufficient labours of literature, and made him anxious to try his strength in public life. At one time he carefully inquired as to the possibility of his becoming a stipendiary magistrate; but the replies he received were not encouraging. At another, he fixed his mind on political journalism; and this had practical result in the establishment of the *Daily News*, which paper, as we have seen, he edited for only a few days. A desire to preside in courts of justice was natural enough in the author of *Oliver Twist*; and, like other men of letters much concerned with social questions, he imagined that the columns of a great newspaper would afford him the best possible field for making known his views and influencing the world. One step which has tempted writers from their appointed task he seems never to have seriously contemplated; he received invitations to stand as a Parliamentary candidate, but gave no ear to them.

The term which described him as politician and social reformer is no longer in common use; he was a Radical. This meant, of course, one who was discontented with the slow course of legislation, moving decorously "from precedent to precedent", and with the aristocratic ideas underlying English life; one who desired radical changes, in the direction of giving liberty and voice to the majority of the people. In a day of advancing Socialism, the demands put forward by such men seem timidly tentative. To our mind, Dickens is in most things a Conservative, and never in his intention democratic—using the word in its original sense. We have to remember the reforms actually achieved in his time, to recognize how progressive was the Radical spirit. Dickens's novels had no small part in the good work, and their influence certainly went further than he knew.

Even in the *Sketches* he writes satirically of the House of Commons, and at a later time his attitude towards Parliament was no less contemptuous than Carlyle's. A letter, bearing the date 1855, declares his grave belief that Representative Government was a failure in England, owing to the national vice which was then known as "flunkeyism". At that time he was writing *Little Dorrit*, and had many reasons for discontent with things in general. But he never desired or anticipated a political revolution of

the thorough kind. His first visit to America gave him impressions on the subject of Republicanism which were never removed. He writes thence to Forster, 1842, that he trembled for any Radical who should cross the Atlantic, "unless he is a Radical on principle, by reason and reflection, and from the sense of right. I do fear that the heaviest blow ever dealt at liberty will be dealt by this country, in the failure of its example to the earth." If that example had proved to be in any respect hopeful, he would undoubtedly have rejoiced. Later he probably felt some little satisfaction in the thought that the great Republic had not done so greatly better, all things considered, than monarchic England.

He never attained to a theory of reform; it was not in his mind, his character, to elaborate such reflections. What he thought about the bygone story of his country we can read in the series of chapters which he wrote for *Household Words*, and afterwards published as the *Child's History of England*. As literature it is not happy; too often one is reminded (at a great distance certainly) of that disgusting series of books called Comic Histories, which someone or other disgraced himself by writing. Dickens had no serious historical knowledge, and no true understanding of what is meant by history; his volume shows a series of more or less grotesque sove-

reigns, who play pranks before high heaven at the expense of the multitudes they are supposed to rule by divine right. Most unfortunate would be the child into whose hand this "history" was put. The one clear suggestion we carry away after trying to read it, is that Dickens congratulated himself on living in the nineteenth century, a subject of Queen Victoria. It was part of his Radicalism to speak of "the bad old times", and true history of course not seldom justifies him. After a visit to Chillon, he writes an admirable letter of description, and ends exclaiming—"Good God, the greatest mystery in all the earth, to me, is how or why the world was tolerated by its Creator through the good old times, and wasn't dashed to fragments". The past, to his mind, was much better forgotten. That the world progressed, he never for a moment held in doubt; but the rate of progress was not at all in keeping with his energetic habits.

In a speech on some public occasion he made a political remark, which, from the ambiguity of its wording, caused newspaper discussion; he said that he had little or no faith in the people governing, but faith limitless in the people governed. Obviously, the shrewdest "trimmer" could not have devised a form of words allowing more latitude of interpretation; but what Dickens meant was plain enough to anyone who did not desire to misunderstand him. He explained

afterwards that the first "people" should be spelt with a small initial letter, the second with a capital. But even so, an ambiguity remains, for "the people governed" may mean either a fact or a hypothesis. Dickens intended the former; he could have implied the latter without any contradiction of his views as seen throughout the novels. He was never a democrat; in his heart he always held that *to be governed* was the people's good; only let the governors be rightly chosen. Herbert Spencer has a precious sentence with which Dickens would profoundly have agreed in all its issues: "There is no political alchemy by which you can get golden conduct out of leaden instincts". Dickens knew—no man better—how unfit are the vast majority of mankind to form sound views as to what is best for them, whether in public or private life; he knew that ignorance inevitably goes hand in hand with forms of baseness, and that though the voice of the people must be heard, it cannot always be allowed to rule. This is very moderate doctrine indeed, but it then qualified a man as a good Radical. Not much more advanced was the position of the little band of teachers who called themselves "Christian Socialists", men with whom Dickens very largely sympathized.

He had the sincerest admiration for Carlyle, the sound of whose great guns could not but delight him—at all events when they were directed

against the aristocracy and its game-preserving habits. Himself an aristocrat to the core in the nobler and truer sense of the word, and with very little patience for the simpletons and weaklings whom Dickens took to his heart with so warm a charity, Carlyle was yet far more passionate than the novelist on behalf of the poor and hard-driven sons of men. A humorist, he too, and among the greatest, Carlyle could jest but grimly where his eyes fell upon those "hard-entreated brothers"; he felt within himself the wrath of the prophet moved to lift up his voice against the world's injustice. Conscious himself of the ills of poverty, not only in childhood but at the time of life when want breeds gall and bitterness in strong hearts, he could remind the poor of their eternal duties with stoic sternness, but in the next moment turned away to hide a tear. Vastly wider was his vision than that of Dickens, and so much the deeper his compassion. Another great name rightly associated with Radicalism is that of Tennyson. He who wrote *Locksley Hall* and *Maud* had no stinted sympathy with the revolt against pride of place. A hackneyed strophe in *Vere de Vere* expressed the inmost thought of Dickens's heart. Tennyson moved on to other things; he had a larger mission; but no word that stands upon his perfect page did wrong to the ideal of humanity he had followed in his youth. Unable though he was to enter into the poet's highest

mood, Dickens held substantially by the same moral and intellectual guidance. Their messages do not contradict, but supplement, each other.

"I exhort my dear children"—thus runs a passage at the close of Dickens's will—"humbly to try to guide themselves by the teaching of the New Testament in its broad spirit, and to put no faith in any man's narrow construction of its letter here and there." It is the essence of his religion; and his religion (oddly as it may sound) had a great deal to do with the tone and teaching of his literary work. We are told that, for a few years, he attended a Unitarian place of worship; but this involved no dogmatic heresy; at all events, no mental travail on religious subjects. It meant only that the clergy of the English church had irritated and disgusted him. The causes of such feeling are not far to seek, but it will be enough here to mention a fact which he emphasizes in one of his letters, that not until the year of grace 1848 did any Bishop of London make his voice heard as to the necessity of providing the poor with better dwellings. One bears in mind what sort of habitations sheltered the poor of London; one remembers also certain events of that very year '48; and the two reflections help to understand Dickens's attitude. Preoccupied always with the thought of Christ's simple teaching, he took trouble to extract, for his children's use, what seemed to him the

essential portions of the New Testament; and it would greatly have pleased him could such a little volume have been used for the instruction of the children of the poor. Instead, he saw them brought up on "the church catechism and other mere formularies and subtleties", and he saw their instructors fighting for this mere husk of religion as though it were the Master's vital word—that word, meanwhile, being by most of them assiduously neglected. None the less he returned to the English Church, and to the end remained a member of it. How he looked upon the more aggressive forms of Dissent we know. It would be a libel to say that Dickens clung to the Establishment because it was "respectable", but undoubtedly he did so in part because the Church belonged to that ancient and solid order of things in England which he never wished to see overturned. Many a man of brains still behaves in the same way, for the same reason. Of his religious sincerity, in the broader sense, there can be no possibility of doubt. He was the last man to drag sacred names and associations into his books on trivial pretexts; but whenever he alludes to Christian precept or makes mention of the Teacher himself, it is with a simple reverence very beautiful and touching; words which came from his own heart, and go straight to that of his reader.

We do not nowadays look for a fervent Chris-

tianity in leaders of the people. In that, as in several other matters, Dickens was by choice retrospective. Still writing at a time when "infidelity"—the word then used—was becoming rife among the populace of great towns, he never makes any reference to it, and probably did not take it into account; it had no place in his English ideal. I doubt, indeed, whether he was practically acquainted with the "free-thinking" workman. A more noticeable omission from his books (if we except the one novel which I cannot but think a failure) is that of the workman at war with capital. This great struggle, going on before him all his life, found no place in the scheme of his fiction. He shows us poor men who suffer under tyranny, and who exclaim against the hardship of things; but never such a representative wage-earner as was then to be seen battling for bread and right. One reason is plain: Dickens did not know the north of England. With adequate knowledge of a manufacturing town, he would never have written so unconvincingly as in his book *Hard Times*—the opportunity for dealing with this subject. Stephen Blackpool represents nothing at all; he is a mere model of meekness, and his great misfortune is such as might befall any man anywhere, the curse of a drunken wife. The book is a crude attack on materialism, a theme which might, of course, have entered very well into a study of the com-

batant working-class. But, as I have already pointed out, the working-class is not Dickens's field, even in London. For the purposes of fiction, it is a class still waiting its portrayer; much has been written about it in novels, but we have no work of the first order dealing primarily with that form of life. Mrs. Gaskell essayed the theme very faithfully, and with some success; but it was not her best work. I can recall no working-class figures in English novels so truly representative as those in Charlotte Brontë's second book. Given a little wider experience, the author of *Shirley* might have exhibited this class in a masterpiece such as we vainly look for.

I do not forget Rouncewell in *Bleak House*. He is a Radical, vigorous in action and in speech; but then, he happens to be an employer, and not a "hand". His purpose in visiting Chesney Wold is to withdraw from domestic service, as from an unsuitable position, the young girl with whom his son has fallen in love. Mr. Rouncewell belongs distinctly to the middle class—the "great" middle class. He is a Radical in the way of becoming a considerable capitalist. Note that Dickens saw no incongruity in these things. He makes it plain to us that the man has risen by honest ability and work; this being so, he has a right to stand firmly, but respectfully, face to face with Sir Leicester Dedlock, or with men of even higher title. It is the middle-class ideal; that

which developed together with England's wealth —at the cost of things which we agree to forget. Dickens greatly admires and sympathizes with Mr. Rouncewell. Yet, at this distance of time, we feel it rather difficult to understand why the successful iron-founder should be a more sympathetic figure than the honest-hearted baronet. The one represents a coming triumph; the other, a sinking cause; but, in the meantime, it remains very doubtful whether the triumphing order will achieve more for the interests of humanity than that which has received its death-blow. Mr. Rouncewell's characteristics are very significant; he is the ideal Englishman in the eye of Dickens, and of most of his contemporaries. The son of a domestic servant—who is herself a model woman, having risen to the position of confidential housekeeper in a great family — he could never for a moment feel ashamed of his origin; nay, on due occasion he will be proud of it; but he is making money, and looks forward to establishing a "family" of his own. Elaborately, yet modestly, he expounds the situation to the wondering Sir Leicester. With a certain semi-conscious self-approval, he makes known to the baronet that it is no uncommon thing for the son of a wealthy manufacturer to fall in love with a working girl, in which event the girl is removed from her lowly position to be suitably educated and prepared for her duties as a middle-

class wife. (Observe our progress; Mr. Rouncewell would hardly be so complacent in speaking of such love-affairs nowadays; but that by the by.) There is no hint that the mothers of prosperous men should be removed from a place of servitude. Old and new here meet amicably. Mrs. Rouncewell would never consent to quit Chesney Wold, where she regards her duties as a high privilege; she "knows her place", and her son, anything but an intentional revolutionist, is quite content that this should be so. The whole scene is a most valuable bit of history. Sir Leicester and his lady, with old Mrs. Rouncewell, represent the past; Rouncewell, his son, and the pretty girl in Lady Dedlock's service, stand for the future. All is civilly transacted; the baronet could not behave otherwise than as *noblesse oblige*; the iron-master is very much of a gentleman. Our author is not entirely aware of his success in satire; for Sir Leicester has more reason to marvel at the social change going on about him than Dickens himself perceived.

Honesty, hard work, worldly success—these are the ideal of the new order; and Dickens heartily approves them. Was he not himself a brilliant example of the self-made man? Much more than that, to be sure; and therefore he supplements the commonly admired scheme of things with a humanity of thought which places him above temporary conditions. Read his

addresses given to audiences of the new democracy; especially that delivered at the Birmingham and Midland Institute, in which he used the ambiguous phrases, quoted above, about the people governing and governed. Here, as often in public speeches, he expressly declares that study must *not* be undertaken solely for the sake of "getting on", but for the moral and intellectual good resulting to him who studies, and for the power it bestows of doing good to others. He said it with all sincerity; but his audience, we may be sure, kept before them, whilst they listened, the mental image of Mr. Rouncewell. When Dickens spoke of Progress, it was thus that the people interpreted him. And of Progress he spoke much and often, convinced as he was that his country was moving steadily towards a better day. Human nature being what it is, a commercial epoch might do much worse than set up Mr. Rouncewell as its patron saint. But Sir Leicester, too, had his intimations of futurity; he may, in his darkest moments, have foreseen Chesney Wold fallen into the possession of some lord of millions, who neither knew nor cared anything about the fair traditions of the past, who revelled in vulgar display, and who, by the force of his glaring example, promoted bitterness and warfare between the classes and the nations of mankind. Dickens lived to see the beginnings of plutocracy. He would

not have glorified *that* form of progress; but all unconsciously he had his part in bringing it about.

One vice which had formerly been proper to aristocratic circles, that of furious gambling, he saw spreading through society at large, and spoke of it as became him. He chanced to be at Doncaster during the races, and after describing in a letter the scenes of that lively time, he adds, "I vow to God that I can see nothing in it but cruelty, covetousness, calculation, insensibility, and low wickedness". These are honest words. But no man's censure can avail against a national curse which is inseparably connected with the triumph of commercialism.

On its better side, then, Dickens's Radicalism consisted in profound sympathy with the poor, and boundless contempt of all social superiority that is merely obstructive. Speaking of *The Chimes*, he said that it was his wish and hope in this book "to strike a blow for the poor". Many such blows he struck, and that right manfully. Our social experience forbids us to think that his views were always wise. He hated the new Poor Law, merely because it put an end to a ruinous system of outdoor relief and compelled the indigent to live in so-called workhouses. One can only wonder that his feeling so much overcame his robust common-sense. Quite late in his career we come across the

old animosity in his description of Betty Higden (*Our Mutual Friend*), one of the least valuable of his pictures of poor life. Old Betty lives in terror of the workhouse, and wishes to die in a ditch rather than be taken care of by the Union. This is intelligible enough; one knows that workhouses are often brutally conducted, and one sympathizes very thoroughly with a loathing of that "charity" which is not at all synonymous with charity in its true sense. But Betty, as a figure in fiction, does not interest us; she is so evidently a mere mouthpiece for criticism of a system; we do not see her, and do not believe in her talk. The practical man only scoffs. And Dickens could so easily have drawn a character at which no scoffing would have been possible.

It is an obvious fault of his work, when he exhibits victims of social wrong, that it takes no due account of the effect of conditions upon character. Think of little Oliver Twist, who has been brought up under Bumble and Company, amid the outcasts of the world, yet is as remarkable for purity of mind as for accuracy of grammar. Oliver, when taken to Fagin's house, is wholly at a loss to conjecture the meaning of words and acts which even a well-bred boy of his age could not fail to understand; the workhouse lad had evidently never heard of pickpockets. Granted that Oliver was of gentle blood, heredity does not go so far as this. Little Dorrit, again:

she is the child of the Marshalsea; and think of what that meant, even apart from the fact of her more literal parentage. Yet we find no blemish in her; she has grown up "under the lock" without contracting one bad habit of thought or speech; indeed, one does not know in what way Amy Dorrit could be morally improved. This is optimism of the crudest kind, but to Dickens and to his readers it suggested no troublesome reflections. To show either Oliver or Amy as a creature of pure instincts, struggling and stumbling towards the light and often sinking in despair, would have satisfied neither; the good character must be good in spite of everything, or the Ruler of the universe seems dishonoured.

To us, in a day of sociology, such ideals are uninteresting, and it relieves us when we come across such a capital study of the everyday fact as is seen (*Dombey*) in Mrs. Toodle's graceless son, Rob the Grinder. Robert was a charity-boy, and probably a fair specimen of the breed. From the doubtless well-meaning care of the Charitable Grinders he has come forth a very troublesome young rascal; slippery, untruthful, dishonest, and the ready instrument of any mature scoundrel who chooses to throw him a copper. This, notwithstanding the sterling qualities of his father and mother. Rob is quite capable of penitence; it makes him uncomfortable when he knows that his good mother is crying

about him; but after every resolution of amendment comes a speedy relapse, and when we at length lose sight of him, it is with no certainty that he will not live to be transported. Excellent characterization, and far more profitable from the point of view of the good Radical than many crossing-sweeper Joes or declaiming Betty Higdens. It goes to the root of the matter. Rob has been infamously neglected by the pretentious folk who made such a merit of supplying him with bread-and-butter and a hideous garb. This was plainly not the way to make a good citizen out of a low-born child —or any other child. It pointed to the need for education other than that supplied by Grinders, however charitable; and from this point of view, Rob is one of the most important of Dickens's social studies.

Whilst speaking of the influence of social conditions, one ought to glance again at the Smallweed family, in *Bleak House*. These creatures, whether it was meant or not, plainly stand for the blighted, stunted, and prematurely old offspring of foggiest London. Impossible, we are told, to conceive of them as having ever been young. Nothing could be truer. These are typical products of a monstrous barbarism masked as civilization; savages amid the smoke and filth and clamour of a huge town, just as much as the dirty grizzled Indian crouched in

a corner of his wigwam. Dickens chose to dwell on things more pleasant and, as it seemed to him, better for the soul; but he knew very well that for one Tim Linkinwater there existed five thousand Smallweeds. Not only in the neighbourhood of Chancery do such weeds crop up; it is the pestilent air of crowded brick and mortar that nourishes them. Statisticians tell us that London families simply die out in the third generation; on the whole, one is glad to hear it. Unfortunately, their decay leaves a miasma; and all children so luckless as to breathe it with their daily air shrivel in mind, if not in body, before they have a chance of enjoying youth.

Dickens's remedy for the evils left behind by the bad old times was, for the most part, private benevolence. He distrusted legislation; he had little faith in charitable associations; though such work as that of the Ragged Schools strongly interested him. His saviour of society was a man of heavy purse and large heart, who did the utmost possible good in his own particular sphere. This, too, was characteristic of the age of free-contract, which claimed every man's right to sell himself as best he could, or buy as many other men as his means allowed. At one with Carlyle in scorning the theory that "cash was the sole nexus" between human beings, Dickens would have viewed uneasily any project for doing away with this nexus altogether; which would mean

the abolition of a form of beneficence in which he delighted. With what gusto does he write of any red-cheeked old gentleman who goes about scattering half-sovereigns, and finding poor people employment, and brightening squalid sick-chambers with the finest produce of Covent Garden. In the Christmas Books, he went to pantomimic lengths in this kind of thing; but no one was asked to take Scrooge very seriously, either as a grasping curmudgeon, or when he bawls out of the window his jovial orders for Christmas fare. Figures, however, such as Mr. Garland and the Cheerybles and John Jarndyce and many another were presented in all good faith. We may even see Dickens himself playing the part, and very creditably, in that delightful Christmas paper of his, the *Seven Poor Travellers*; where it makes one's mouth water to read of the fare he ordered at the inn for those lucky vagabonds. In the Cheeryble brothers he indulges his humane imagination to the full. That there indeed existed a couple of kind-hearted merchants, who were as anxious to give money as others are to make it, we will believe on the author's assurance; but that anyone ever saw the Cheerybles in the flesh we decline to credit. They are chubby fairies in tights and gaiters; a light not of this world flushes about their jolly forms. Dickens becomes wild with joyous sympathy in telling of their eccentric

warm-heartedness. "Damn you, Tim Linkinwater!" they exclaim — unable in the ordinary language of affection to set free their feelings. To double a clerk's salary is a mere bit of forenoon fun; after dinner, we picture them supplying fraudulent debtors with capital for a new undertaking, or purchasing an estate in Hampshire to be made over forthwith to the widow of some warehouse porter with sixteen children. The harm they must have done, those two jolly old boys! But Dickens would not hear of such a suggestion. He considered, above all, the example of self-forgetfulness, of mercy. And as "people in a book", it is likely enough that Tim Linkinwater's employers are to this day bearing far and wide a true gospel of humanity.

The very heartiness of this benevolence precludes every suspicion of offensive patronage. We know that these men do good because it gives them more pleasure than anything else; and their geniality is a result thereof. Even so in Dickens himself; he is incapable of speaking and thinking of the poor as from a higher place; no man ever pleaded their cause with simpler sincerity. He is always, and naturally, on their side, as against the canter, and the bully, and the snob; even as against a class of rich folk with whom he had otherwise no quarrel. It overjoys him to find good in anyone of lowly station, to show virtues in the uneducated.

Those very Cheeryble brothers, do they not *eat with their knives*? We should not have known it, but he goes out of his way to tell us; he insists upon the fact with pride, and to throw scorn upon the fastidious, who would disapprove of this habit. Always it is the heart rather than the head. A man who has been to school and college may, of course, have virtues; but how much fairer do they shine — thinks Dickens—in him who drops his h's and does not know the world is round! In this respect—as in various others—there is a difference between Dickens and that other Radical novelist, Charles Kingsley. The author of *Alton Locke* chooses for his hero a working-man whose intellect is so much above the average that he is nothing less than a true poet. One cannot imagine such a figure in Dickens. Copperfield—by the autobiographic necessity of the case—does not come of the proletariate, and I remember no instance of a person born in that class to whom Dickens gives anything more than mechanical aptitudes. It was reserved for Thackeray to make a great artist of a butler's son, and for Kingsley to show us a tailor writing "The Sands of Dee". I mention this simply as a fact, without implying any adverse criticism; it was the part of Dickens to show the beauty of moral virtues, and to declare that these could be found in all kinds of men, irrespective of birth and education. When

sending forth her nephew into the world, Betsy Trotwood gave him this brief counsel: "Never be mean; never be false; never be cruel". Better advice she could not have bestowed; and it was the ideal of conduct held up by Dickens to all his readers, from beginning to end. If he could discover shining examples of such virtue among the poor and the ignorant, their mental dulness seemed to him of but small account.

It does his heart good to play the advocate and the friend to those with whom nature and man have dealt most cruelly. Upon a Smike or a Maggy (in *Little Dorrit*) he lavishes his tenderness simply because they are hapless creatures from whom even ordinary kind people would turn with involuntary dislike. Maggy is a starved and diseased idiot, a very child of the London gutter, moping and mowing to signify her pleasures or her pains. Dickens gives her for protector the brave and large-hearted child of the Marshalsea, whose own sufferings have taught her to compassionate those who suffer still more. Maggy is to be rescued from filth and cold and hunger; is to be made as happy as her nature will allow. It is nobly done, and, undoubtedly, an example of more value to the world than any glorification of triumphant intellect.

At times, he went too far in his championship

of the humble. Chapter xxxviii of *The Old Curiosity Shop* contains a paragraph of moralizing in which it is declared that the love of home felt by the poor is "of truer metal" than anything of the kind possible in the wealthy. Twenty years later Dickens would not have spoken so inconsiderately. Sometimes, too, he goes beyond the safe mean in his exhibition of virtuous humility. The lad Kit, who not only "came back to work out the shilling", but repels with a sense of injury an offer of new service at higher wages, comes dangerously near to the kind of thing one meets with in stories written for Sunday School prizes. Many readers, I dare say, are of opinion that Dickens is constantly falling into this error; that it is his besetting sin. Well, that is one way of regarding the matter; on the alternative point of view I have sufficiently insisted.

The enviously discontented poor seldom come forward in his pages; indeed, the discontented in any spirit are not often shown. An interesting exception is his paper on "Tramps", in the *Uncommercial Traveller*, where tramps of every species are discussed with much knowledge and infinite humour, and without a trace of sentimentality. We hear the whining of the rascals, and their curses when they fail to get anything by it; their hopeless brutality is set forth with most refreshing candour. Of characters in the novels,

there is no low-class malcontent worth mention except Charley Hexam. He, indeed, makes a very good exception, for he is precisely the one member of his class whom Dickens shows as tolerably educated. The date of *Our Mutual Friend* is 1865; the great scheme of national education was to be established only five years later; and had Dickens been able to foresee every result of 1870, he could not have drawn a more truly prophetic figure than Charley Hexam. This youth has every fault that can attach to a half-taught cub of his particular world. He is a monstrous egotist, to begin with, and "school" has merely put an edge on to the native vice. The world exists solely for his benefit; his "esuriency", to use Carlyle's word, has no bounds. Then he is of course a snob, and with fair opportunity will develop into a petty tyrant with an inclination to active cruelty. Something of resemblance exists between this fellow and Tom Tulliver; it is an odd coincidence, too, that both should have sisters so vastly their superiors, yet alike devoted to them. Tom had the advantage of country air; he is never quite unwholesome, his selfish coarseness of fibre is recognizable as old English. But Hexam's pride is of base metal, through and through. He is capable of swaggering in a bar-room, of lying contemptibly to an audience of commoner lads. Before he was many years older, he became a "secularist"—

quite without conviction, — and delivered peculiarly blatant lectures; after that he added "socialism", and pointed to himself as an example of the man of great talents, who had never found a fair chance. Dickens did well in giving him for teacher and friend such a man as Bradley Headstone, whose passionate nature (with which one can sympathize well enough when it comes to the love-story) must needs have an evil influence on Lizzie's brother. But this was not absolutely necessary for the development of a Charley Hexam, whose like, at this moment, may be found throughout London by anyone studying the less happy results of the board-school system.

Of noble discontent, Dickens cannot be said to give us any picture at all. The inventor in *Little Dorrit*, foiled by the Circumlocutionists, is too mild and dreamy to nourish a spirit of revolt; Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times* would hold rebellion a sin; and as for the rank and file of hungry creatures, they seem never to have heard that there is movement in the land, that voices are raised on their behalf, and even to some purpose. No; their hope is in the Cheeryble brothers; not at all in Chartist or in Radical or in Christian Socialist. Very significant the omission. Dickens, for all his sympathy, could not look with entire approval on the poor grown articulate about their wrongs. He would not have used the phrase, but he thought the thought,

that humble folk must know "their station". He was a member of the middle class, and as far from preaching "equality" in its social sense as any man that ever wrote. Essentially a member of the great middle class, and on that very account able to do such work, to strike such blows, for the cause of humanity in his day and generation.

CHAPTER XI

COMPARISONS

Twenty years ago a familiar topic for debating societies was a comparison of the literary characteristics of Dickens and Thackeray—or of Thackeray and Dickens, I forget which. Not impossibly, the theme is still being discussed in country towns or London suburbs. Of course, it was always an absurdity, the points of difference between these authors being so manifest, and their mutual relations in literature so easy of dismissal, that debate in the proper sense there could be none. As to which of the two was the "greater novelist", the question may be left for answer to those who are capable of seriously propounding it. He will be most positive in judgment whose acquaintance with the novelists' writings is least profound.

It seems to me, however, that we may, without waste of time, suggest comparison in certain points between Dickens and one or two of his foreign contemporaries, writers of fiction who, like the English master, were pre-occupied with social questions, and evinced special knowledge in dealing with the life of the poor. Balzac, Victor Hugo, Dostoieffsky, Daudet—these names

readily occur to one, and I shall not err in assuming familiarity with their principal works in those who have cared to read so far in this little book. Of course I have no intention of saying all that might easily be said as to points of contrast: so thorough an Englishman as Dickens must needs differ in particulars innumerable from authors marked on their side by such strong national characteristics. Enough to indicate certain lines of similarity, or divergence, which, pursued in thought, may help to a complete understanding of our special subject.

Evidently there is a difference on the threshold between Dickens and three of the foreign authors named—a difference which seems to involve the use of that very idle word "realism". Novels such as those of Balzac are said to be remorseless studies of actual life; whereas Dickens, it is plain, never pretends to give us life itself, but a selection, an adaptation. Balzac, calling his work the "human comedy", is supposed to have smiled over this revelation of the littleness of man, his frequent sordidness, his not uncommon bestiality. Dostoieffsky, absorbed in compassionate study of the wretched, the desolate, the oppressed, by no means goes out of his way to spare our feelings; and Daudet, so like to Dickens in one or two aspects, matures into a conception of the novel which would have been intolerable to the author of *David Copperfield*—cultivates

a frankness regarding the physical side of life which in England would probably have to be defended before legal authorities with an insular conception of art. Realists, we say; men with an uncompromising method, and utterly heedless as to whether they give pleasure or pain.

The distinction is in no way a censure upon Dickens. As soon as a writer sits down to construct a narrative, to imagine human beings, or adapt those he knows to changed circumstances, he enters a world distinct from the actual, and, call himself what he may, he obeys certain laws, certain conventions, without which the art of fiction could not exist. Be he a true artist, he gives us pictures which represent his own favourite way of looking at life; each is the world in little, and the world as *he* prefers it. So that, whereas execution may be rightly criticised from the common point of view, a master's general conception of the human tragedy or comedy must be accepted as that without which his work could not take form. Dickens has just as much right to his optimism in the world of art, as Balzac to his bitter smile. Moreover, if it comes to invidious comparisons, one may safely take it for granted that "realism" in its aggressive shapes is very far from being purely a matter of art. The writer who shows to us all the sores of humanity, and does so with a certain fury of determination, may think that he is doing it

for art's sake; but in very truth he is enjoying an attack upon the order of the universe—always such a tempting form of sport. Well, Dickens was also combative, and enjoyed his palpable hits; only, his quarrel was with certain people, and certain ways of thought, never with human nature or the world at large.

There are orders of imaginative work. A novel is distinct from a romance; so is a fairy tale. But there can be drawn only a misleading, futile distinction between novels realistic and idealistic. It is merely a question of degree and of the author's temperament.

In Balzac's *Cousin Pons* are two figures, amiable, eccentric, such as Dickens might have conceived in other surroundings. Pons, the collector of bric-a-brac, and his friend Schmucke, are good, simple creatures, and Balzac loves them; but so bent is he on showing that life, or at all events Paris, is a vast machine for torturing and crushing the good (and therefore the weak), that these two old men end in the most miserable way, amid baseness and cruelty which triumphs over them. We know how Dickens would have shaped the story. In art he was incapable of such sternness; and he utterly refused to believe that fate was an irresponsible monster. Compare the Maison Vauquer in *Le Père Goriot*, with "Todgers's" in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. No one will for a moment believe that Dickens's picture differs from that of

Balzac, because the one is a bit of London, the other of Paris. Nor is it a question of defect of humour; Mme Vauquer (née de Conflans) and her group of boarders in the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève, are presented with sufficient suggestion of humorous power. But Balzac delights in showing us how contemptible and hateful such persons can be; whereas Dickens throws all his heart on to the side of the amusing and the good. When sheets are wanted to shroud the dead body of poor old Goriot (a victim of atrocious greed), Mme Vauquer exclaims: "*Prends les draps retournés; par Dieu! c'est toujours assez bon pour un mort*". It is a fierce touch, and Dickens could no more have achieved it in a novel than have uttered the words in his own person. There is a difference of artistic method. We are free to express a preference for this or for that way of presenting life; but such preference involves no judgment. On either side, a host of facts can be brought forward to justify the artist's view; the critic's part is merely to inquire how the work has been executed.

One finds in Balzac a stronger intellect, but by no means a greater genius. Very much wider is his scope in character and circumstance; he sees as clearly and as minutely as Dickens; but I doubt whether he ever imparts his vision with the vividness of Dickens at his best; and assuredly his leagues of description fail in art when com-

pared with the English author's mode of showing us what he wishes. In construction they are both flagrantly defective, though erring in different ways.

Let the critic who dismisses Dickens's figures as types, turn for a moment to Victor Hugo's masterpiece, *Les Misérables*. What are we to call the personages in this story? Put side by side the detective Javert and Inspector Bucket. It is plain at once that in the latter we have an individual, a living man full of peculiarities, some professional, others native to himself; he represents, no doubt, the London police force of his day, but only as any very shrewd, brisk, and conscientious inspector would have done so. Javert, on the other hand, is an incarnation of the penal code; neither more nor less. Never for one instant do we mistake him for a being such as walks the earth. He is altogether superhuman; he talks the language of an embodied Idea; it cannot surprise us however ubiquitous he seems or however marvellous his scent for a criminal. Go through the book, and it is always the same thing. Jean Valjean might be likened to Prometheus; he is a type of suffering humanity, he represents all the victims of social wrong. Let his adventures go to any length of the heroic, the surprising, we do not protest; he is not one man, but many. Fantine, too; what is she but the spirit of outraged womanhood? Even as Cosette

stands for childhood robbed of its natural inheritance, trodden under foot by a greedy and ferocious civilization. *Les Misérables* is not rightly to be called a novel; it belongs to the region of symbolic art. And my only reason for putting it beside Dickens's work is to make manifest at a glance his superior quality as a writer of fiction.

Hugo is concerned with wide historical questions, with great forces in the life of the world; he probes the theory of society, searches into the rights of the individual; he judges man; he seeks to justify the ways of God. He is international; and his vast drama belongs to all modern time. He is in the faithfulest sense of the word a democrat; for him there can be, in the very nature of things, no ruling voice save that of the people; all other potentates and lawgivers are mere usurpers, to be suffered for a time. Dickens, though engaged heart and soul in the cause of the oppressed, fights their battle on a much narrower ground. The laws he combats are local, belonging, for the most part, to certain years of grace. His philosophy is the simplest possible, and all his wisdom is to be read in the Sermon on the Mount. Democrat he is none, but a hearty English Radical. His force is in his intense nationality, enabling him to utter the thoughts of voiceless England. Yet of necessity there are many points at which his work and Hugo's touch together, inviting comparison. Child-life is one

of them. I have spoken of Dickens's true pathos; but is there anything in all his stories that springs from so deep a fount of tender pity as that vision of Cosette putting out her wooden shoe at Christmas? For the rest, Dickens's children are generally creatures of flesh and blood; Cosette, save at moments, belongs to the spirit world. An inferiority in the Englishman —if we care to glance at it—becomes plain by a contrast of his wronged women with Fantine. Abstractions these, as we have already noted, and therefore an illustration of what his people for the most part are *not*; as abstractions, how thin and futile and untrue when brought into the light of a fine creation, such as the mother of Cosette! At root, both writers have the same faith in man; they glorify the same virtues. But for Dickens life is so much simpler—and so greatly more amusing. From his point of view, how easily all could be set right, if the wealthy and the powerful were but reasonably good-natured—with an adequate sense of humour!

He is wroth with institutions; never bitter against fate, as is so often the case in "realistic" novels of our time. Something of this, though for the most part unconsciously, appears in the great Russian novelist Dostoieffsky, whose work, in which Dickens would have found much to like and admire, shows so sombre a colouring beside the English novels. It is gloomy, for one reason,

because it treats of the empire of the Tzar; for another, because Dostoieffsky, a poor and suffering man, gives us with immense power his own view of penury and wretchedness. Not seldom, in reading him, one is reminded of Dickens, even of Dickens's peculiarities in humour. The note of his books is sympathy; a compassion so intense as often to seem morbid—which indeed it may have been, as a matter of fact. One novel is called *The Idiot*, a study of mental weakness induced by epilepsy. Mark the distance between this and *Barnaby Rudge*; here we have the pathos of saddest truth, and no dallying with half-pleasant fancies. But read the opening of the story called in its French translation *Humiliés et Offensés*; it is not impossible that Dickens's direct influence worked with the writer in those pages describing the hero's kindness to the poor little waif who comes under his care; in any case, spiritual kindred is manifest. And in how alien a world as to all things outward!

Dostoieffsky's masterpiece, *Crime and Punishment*, abounds in Dickens-like touches in its lighter passages. Extravagances of character delighted him, and he depicted them with a freer hand than Dickens was permitted or would have cared to use. Suppose the English novelist born in Russia, he might well have been the author of the long scene at the beginning of the book, where Sonia's father,

the eccentric drunkard, makes himself known to us in his extraordinary monologue. For that matter, with such change of birth and breeding, Dickens might well have written the whole book, which is a story of a strange murder, of detective ingenuity, of a ruined girl who keeps her soul clean, and of a criminal redeemed by love and faith in Christ; the scene throughout being amid the darkness, squalor, and grotesque ugliness of Russia's capital. Dostoieffsky is invariably pure of tone and even decorous from our own peculiar point of view; his superiority as a "realist" to the author of *David Copperfield* consists merely in his frank recognition of facts which Dickens is obliged to ignore, or to hint with sighing timidity. Sonia could not have been used by the Englishman as a heroine at all; as a subordinate figure he would have turned her to his most stagey purposes, though meaning all the time an infinitude of gentleness and sympathy; instead of a most exceptional girl (by no means, I think, impossible), she would have become a glaring unreality, giving neither pleasure nor solace to any rational reader. The crucial chapter of the story, the magnificent scene in which Raskolnikoff makes confession to Sonia, is beyond Dickens, as we know him; it would not have been so but for the defects of education and the social prejudices which forbade his tragic gift to develop. Raskolnikoff himself, a typical

Russian, a man of brains maddened by hunger and by the sight of others hungry, is the kind of character Dickens never attempted to portray; his motives, his reasonings, could not be comprehended by an Englishman of the lower middle class. And the murder itself—Bill Sikes, Jonas Chuzzlewit, show but feebly after we have watched that lank student, with the hatchet under his coat, stealing up the stairs; when we have seen him do his deed of blood, and heard the sound of that awful bell tinkling in the still chamber. Dostoieffsky's work is indescribably powerful and finely tragic; the murders in Dickens are too vulgar of motive greatly to impress us, and lack the touch of high imaginativeness.

Little as he cared for foreign writers, we learn that Dickens found pleasure in a book called *Le Petit Chose*, the first novel of a very young author named Alphonse Daudet. It would have been strange indeed had he not done so; for Daudet at that time as closely resembled Dickens himself as a Frenchman possibly could. To repeated suggestions that he modelled his early work on that of his great contemporary, Daudet replied with a good-humoured shake of the head; and as an illustration of how one can seem to plagiarize without doing anything of the kind, he mentions in his *Memoirs* that he was about to give to the little lame girl, Désirée Delobelle, the occupation of doll's dressmaker, when a friend made known

to him the existence of just such a figure in *Our Mutual Friend.* If indeed Daudet did not deceive himself, we can only wonder at the striking resemblance between his mind and that of Dickens. Not only is it a question of literary manner, and of the humour which is a leading characteristic in both; the Frenchman is penetrated with a delicate sense, a fine enjoyment, of the virtues and happiness of simple domestic life, and in a measure has done for France what Dickens in his larger way did for England, shaping examples of sweetness and goodness among humble folk, which have been taken to their hearts by his readers. Bélisaire, in *Fromont Jeune*, is a typical instance; and the like may be found even in his later novels, where, as some think, he has been unhappily led after false gods by the literary fashion of his time. Real life has frequently supplied him with an artistic motive precisely such as Dickens rejoiced in finding; for example, "le père Joyeuse" in *Le Nabab*, the clerk who, having lost his employment, shrinks from letting his family know, and leaves home each morning as if going to the office as usual—a delightful sketch, done with perfection of kindliness and humour. Then, there is Daudet's fine compassion. He says, again in his *Memoirs*: "*Je me sens en cœur l'amour de Dickens pour les disgraciés et les pauvres, les enfances mêlées aux misères des*

grandes villes"; and this is abundantly proved throughout his writings.

Daudet has a great advantage in his mastery of construction. Where, as in *Fromont Jeune*, he constructs too well, that is to say, on the stage model, we see what a gain it was to him to have before his eyes the Paris stage of the Second Empire instead of that of London in the early Victorian time. Moreover, he is free from English fetters; he can give us such a portrait as Sidonie, done with wonderful truth, yet with a delicacy, even a tenderness, which keeps it thoroughly in tone with his pure ideals. I do not speak of the later novels, much as I see to admire and like in them; only of the time when his resemblance to Dickens was most pronounced. Jack's mother, the feather-brained Ida de Barancy, belongs to a very different order of art from anything attained in female portraiture by the English novelist. In his men, too, this advantage is often very noticeable. Delobelle the illustrious, and the mouthing D'Argenton, have points of character which easily suggest persons in Dickens; but they belong to a world which has more colour, more variety, and the writer does not fear to present them completely. These things notwithstanding, Dickens's work is of course beyond comparison wider in scope and richer in significance. We may concede to Daudet all his superiority as a finished artist,

and only become the more conscious of Dickens's unapproachable genius.

Telling us of the hapless lad from whom he modelled his Jack, Daudet notes points of difference between the real and the fictitious character; the Jack he knew had not altogether that refinement which heightens our interest in the hero of the novel. "*Il faut dire*", adds the writer, "*que le peuple ignore bien des délicatesses, des susceptibilités morales.*" Could such a remark possibly have fallen from the pen of Dickens, even when not employed upon fiction? Of "the people" he could neither have said nor thought it; was it not to "the people" that he turned when he wanted an example of the finest delicacy of heart, the most sensitive moral susceptibility? Perhaps it was just this lack of faith that held Daudet from fulfilling what seemed the promise of his early time. Such lack of faith in the multitude is not difficult to account for in a very acute observer. It was especially hard to maintain in face of a literary movement which devoted itself to laying bare the worst of popular life. The brothers Goncourt, Flaubert, and M. Zola were not companions likely to fortify a naïve ideal. It is just possible that they inflicted serious injury upon Daudet's work, and robbed France of a precious gift—the books he might have written but for the triumph of "realism". Dickens, who died before the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, can

barely have suspected the lines that literature was to follow in the next decade; to the end he represented in himself a literary force which had burst upon the world with irresistible charm, had held its way victoriously for five-and-thirty years, and seemed as far as ever from losing its dominion over English readers. The likelihood is that his unwavering consistency will stand him in better stead through the twentieth century than any amount of that artistic perfection which only a small class can appreciate and enjoy.

CHAPTER XII

THE LATTER YEARS

It is the privilege of a great writer to put into his work the finest qualities of his heart and brain, to make permanent the best part of himself, and through that to influence the world. In speaking of Dickens's triumphs as an author, I have felt that the most fervent praise could not err by excess; every time I open his books, as the years go on, it is with ever more of wonder, delight, admiration, and love. To point out his shortcomings as a man could give little satisfaction to one who thus thinks of him; merely for the sake of completeness in my view of his life and works, I feel it necessary to glance at those disastrous latter years which show him as a "public entertainer", all true peace and leisure at an end, shortening his life that he might be able to leave a fortune to his family. Carlyle said that the story of Charles Dickens's doings in America "transcended in tragic interest, to a thinking reader, most things one has seen in writing". We see plainly enough what a deplorable mistake it was, and men such as Forster, Dickens's true friends, not only saw it at the time, but did their utmost in the way of protest.

He himself had no misgiving—or would confess none. In the words with which he prefaced his first paid reading (1858) he said he had satisfied himself that to adopt this career could involve no possible compromise of the credit and independence of literature, and that whatever brought a public man and his public face to face, on terms of mutual confidence and respect, was of necessity a good thing. Both assertions may be contested. Carlyle, and many another man of letters, saw very grave objections to semi-theatrical "touring" on the score of the credit of literature; and as to the relations between "a public man" and his admirers, it is very doubtful whether a novelist should bear that title at all. But Dickens's intimate relations with the theatre made it impossible for him to give due weight to these objections. Moreover he was a very keen man of business, and could not resist the temptation of enriching himself by means which, in themselves, were thoroughly congenial to him.

For he enjoyed those readings. The first he ever gave—that of his *Christmas Carol* to a little group of friends—was arranged on his own suggestion, and he read several times for charitable purposes before he began to do so for profit. Not without reason he felt that all who knew him in his books were as personal friends to him, and he to them; he delighted in standing

before those vast audiences, and moving them to laughter or to tears. Opinions differ as to his merits as a reader, but it is plain that the public thought him unsurpassable. He had always wished to shine as an actor; as a "reader" (it was in truth recitation, and not reading) he came very near to that—especially in such efforts as the murder scene from *Oliver Twist*. The life, too, one of ceaseless travel and excitement, suited him at the time when he was making grave changes in his domestic circumstances; changes which may or may not have been inevitable, but which doubtless helped to urge him along the fatal course. Forster's Biography makes it clear that, from 1857 onwards, Dickens suffered somewhat in character from the effects of this public life; nothing like so much as in health; but he was no longer quite the man of his best literary years. Remember the intensely practical strain in his nature. As a very young man, he allowed himself to be put at a disadvantage with publishers; but this was soon, and energetically, set right; afterwards, he transacted the business of his books with high commercial aptitude. It was the same in everything; subtract his genius, and we have a most capable, upright, vigorous man of business—the very ideal (so much better than all but a few actual examples) of commercial England. It is a surprising combination—such qualities united with those which characterized

the author Charles Dickens. To minds of a certain type there appears to be the utmost satisfaction in pointing out that Shakespeare made money, and built "the trimmest house in Stratford town"; but who can seriously suggest that, even *mutatis mutandis*, Shakespeare's business aptitudes and success were comparable with those of Dickens? The author of *Hamlet* indubitably had common sense, but, most happily, business as it is understood among us nowadays had not been dreamt of in Elizabethan England, and one may very safely assert that Shakespeare was no distinguished merchant even in the sense of that day. Dickens might easily have become a great capitalist; and his generosity would have secured him against any self-reproach when treading the ways of capitalism. He reflected with annoyance on the serious loss occasioned him by the lack of American copyright; granted the opportunity, he could have drawn up an international arrangement in this matter which would have been a model of clear-headed justice. After all, what was the financial result of his brilliant and laborious life? He had a large family; his expenses were considerable; he bought himself a country house, which became to him, as an occupation of his leisure, a small Abbotsford. And at his death he leaves an estimated total of £93,000. The merest bagatelle, from a commercial point of view. His

readings seem to have brought him, altogether, a matter of some £40,000. What man of business, with a world-wide reputation, would be content to toil to the detriment of his health for such results? I go into these details merely to suggest how a man such as Dickens must have felt regarding the pecuniary question. Save in reference to American copyright, he did not complain; that would have been ignoble, and inconsistent with his habits of mind. But it seemed to him indispensable that he should gain more money than would arrive from his literary work. His sons must go forth into the world as English gentlemen—a term implying so much; his daughters must be made independent; his own mode of life must be on a scale recognized as "respectable" by middle-class England. One need not be much of an optimist to foresee that, as in days gone by, so in a time to come, the spectacle of such a man so beset will be altogether impossible, and the record of such a life will become a matter for wonder and sad smiling.

With the utmost precision of punctuality in all details of daily life, he combined a character of sanguine impulsiveness, and as a result thereof could not endure restraints and burdens which ordinary men accept as a matter of course. If he desired a thing, he must at once obtain it; or at all events aim at obtaining it, and with all his energy. He could work day after day—the kind

of work which demands a patience, an assiduity, a self-control unintelligible to the mass of mankind; could exhibit in himself, and exact from others, a rare conscientiousness in things small and great; but when it came to any kind of constraint which was not imposed by his own temperament he failed at once. The moralist may remark, in his dry way, that no man can receive so much of the good things of life, and remain unspoilt; that Dickens, moreover, was a very unlikely man to go through the ordeal of world-wide flattery, and draw from it moral benefit. The wonder is that Dickens was spoilt so little. In a day when there exists no writer of supreme acceptance, we are in danger of forgetting what his popularity meant. I suppose that for at least five-and-twenty years of his life, there was not an English-speaking household in the world, above the class which knows nothing of books, where his name was not as familiar as that of any personal acquaintance, and where an allusion to characters of his creating could fail to be understood. When seeking a title for the periodical eventually called *Household Words*—it was in 1849—he seriously suggested "CHARLES DICKENS: Conducted by Himself". It was, he admitted, "a strange idea, but with decided advantages". In any other writer then living, the idea would have been strange indeed, and of anything but decided advantage. Dickens could

entertain it without egotism, without ridicule; far and wide, at home and abroad, hands would have clutched eagerly at the magazine bearing such a superscription. He passed it over; but whatever the title of the paper he edited, *Household Words* or *All the Year Round*, the name it bore in all minds was no other than "Charles Dickens".

It is easy to distinguish between the British characteristic of practicality, and the unpleasant attribute of worldliness; but the intensely practical man seldom escapes a tincture of that neighbouring vice. In dismissing as "fanciful" every intrusion of the pure *idea*, the English guard themselves against certain risks, and preserve a pretty even current of national life; but they pay a penalty, understood or not. Dickens is an illustration of it. I cannot do better than copy the words written on this subject by his most intimate friend; they occur in the chapter which tells all that need be told about his domestic troubles. "Not his genius only, but his whole nature, was too exclusively made up of sympathy for, and with, the real in its most intense form, to be sufficiently provided against failure in the realities around him. There was for him no 'city of the mind' against outward ills for inner consolation and shelter. . . . By his very attempts to escape the world, he was driven back into the thick of it. But what he would have sought there, it supplies to none;

and to get the infinite out of anything so finite, has broken many a stout heart." This, observe, is spoken of a man who was not only "good" in most meanings of the word, but had a profound feeling for the moral significance of the religion he professed. We see the type of nineteenth-century Englishmen; the breed of men who established a commercial supremacy which is (or very lately was) the wonder and the envy of the outer world. You cannot create Lancashire and Yorkshire if at the same time you have to guard a "city of the mind"; much too embarrassing would be the multitude of uneasy questions rushing in at every new step. This typical Englishman has no "detachment". In work or play, he must press onward by the world's high-road. In 1857 Dickens wrote to Forster: "I have now no relief but in action. I am become incapable of rest. I am quite confident I should rust, break, and die, if I spared myself. Much better to die, going. What I am in that way, nature made me first, and my way of life has of late, alas! confirmed." It was a moment of peculiar stress, but that was not needed to explain the letter. As I said in the early pages of this essay, a better education might have done much for Dickens; yet it could hardly have helped him to that "removed ground" where some few men, even in thriving England, were able to possess their souls in peace.

His life was ceaseless activity, mental and physical. After an ailing childhood, he grew into health which perhaps was never robust, but which allowed him to expend the energy of three ordinary mortals. He thought nothing of a twenty-mile walk in the odd hours before dinner, and would not be deterred from it by rain or snow. His position obliged him to give a great deal of time to social and public engagements; yet they never interfered with his literary tasks. He was always ready to take the chair at a meeting for any charitable purpose with which he sympathized, and his speeches on these occasions were masterpieces of their kind. Three of them are worthy of a permanent place among his writings; that spoken on behalf of the Child's Hospital; that in which, at the dinner of the Newspaper Press Fund, he gave his recollections of life as a reporter; that for the Theatrical Fund, in which he sketches, as no other man ever did or could have done, the whole world of the stage, with the drollest humour and the kindliest note of pathos. With a popular audience on such occasions he was most perfectly in touch. Never for a moment did his style or thought rise above their heads; never was there a suspicion of condescending. He knew how to bestow pleasant flattery, without ever passing the limits of tact and taste. If ladies were among his hearers, he always put in a word of jesting gallantry

which was exactly what they liked and expected. Withal, his talk invariably made appeal to the good and unselfish instincts; it was always admirable common sense; it was always morally profitable.

The power he had of pursuing his imaginative tasks amid distractions which most men would find fatal, is especially interesting. Read Forster's description of the state of things in Dickens's house just before the Christmas of 1856, whilst *Little Dorrit* was being written. "Preparations for the private play had gone on incessantly, and in turning the school-room into a theatre sawing and hammering worthy of Babel continued for weeks." The novelist became stage-carpenter as well as stage-manager. "All day long", he writes in a letter, "a labourer heats size over the fire in a great crucible. We eat it, drink it, breathe it, and smell it. Seventy paint-pots (which came in a van) adorn the stage." The private play was acted night after night to overflowing audiences, and not till the 20th of January was the house clear and quiet. But fiction-writing went on as usual, with never a hint at difficulty owing to circumstances.

In his letter-writing alone, Dickens did a life's literary work. Nowadays no one thinks of writing such letters; I mean, letters of such length and detail, for the quality is Dickens's own. He evidently enjoyed this use of the pen. Page after

page of Forster's "Life" is occupied with transcription from private correspondence, and never a line of this but is thoroughly worthy of print and preservation. If he makes a tour in any part of the British Isles, he writes a full description of all he sees, of everything that happens, and writes it with such gusto, such mirth, such strokes of fine picturing, as appear in no other private letters ever given to the public. Naturally cheerful beyond the common wont, a holiday gave him the exhilaration of a school-boy. See how he writes from Cornwall, when on a trip with two or three friends, in 1843. "Heavens! if you could have seen the necks of bottles, distracting in their immense variety of shape, peering out of the carriage pockets! If you could have witnessed the deep devotion of the postboys, the maniac glee of the waiters! If you could have followed us into the earthy old churches we visited, and into the strange caverns on the gloomy sea-shore, and down into the depths of mines, and up to the tops of giddy heights, where the unspeakably green water was roaring, I don't know how many hundred feet below! . . . I never laughed in my life as I did on this journey. It would have done you good to hear me. I was choking and gasping and bursting the buckle off the back of my stock, all the way. And Stanfield"—the painter—"got into such apoplectic entanglements that we were obliged to beat him

on the back with portmanteaus before we could recover him."

The mention of "bottles, distracting in their immense variety", leads one to speak of the convivial temper so constantly exhibited in Dickens's letters and books. It might be easily imagined that he was a man of large appetite and something of a toper. Nothing of the kind; when it came to actual eating and drinking no man was more habitually moderate. I am not much in the way of attending "temperance" meetings, and cannot say whether the advocates of total abstinence make a point of holding up Dickens's works to reprobation; but I should hardly think they look upon him with great favour. Indeed, it is an odd thing that, writing so much of the London poor, he so seldom refers to the curse of drunkenness. Of drinking there is any amount, but its results serve only for gaiety or comic extravagance. One remembers "Mr. Dolls" in *Our Mutual Friend*, a victim to the allurements of gin; he is a pitiful creature, and Jenny, the doll's dressmaker, suffers much from his eccentricities; for all that, we are constrained to laugh at him. A tragedy of drink Dickens never gives us. Criticising Cruikshank's pictured morality, "The Bottle", he points out, truly enough, that the artist had seriously erred in making the habit of drunkenness arise from mere conviviality in persons well-to-do; drink, as a real curse, being

commonly the result of overwork, semi-starvation, vile dwellings, and lack of reasonable entertainment. Nowadays he would necessarily have viewed the subject in a graver light. The national habits in this matter have been so greatly changed during the last half-century, that it would now be impossible to glorify the flowing bowl as Dickens does in all his most popular writing. His works must have had a great part in promoting that Christmas joviality which of late years is manifestly on the decline. Whatever the perils of strong drink, his imagination could not dispense with it. One is amused to find him writing to his friend from America: "I wish you drank punch, dear Forster. It's a shabby thing not to be able to picture you with that cool green glass." How it happened that John Forster, after many years of such intimacy, did not make at all events a show of handling the "cool green glass", passes our comprehension. We hear in Dickens's words a note of humorous, yet true, regret; it seemed impossible to him that a man could be in the enjoyment of his fireside if no alcoholic comfort stood at his elbow. Scott, by the by, though as hearty and hospitable a man as ever lived, and in youth no shirker of the bottle, always speaks with grave disapprobation of excessive conviviality. Possibly a difference of rank accounts for this; whilst the upper classes were learning to live with prudence and

decency, the lower clung to their old habits. Be that as it may, Dickens could not throw his weight on the side of teetotalism. He held that, if social reforms such as he advocated could only be set in motion, the evils of drink would tend to disappear of themselves. He was right; the tendency showed itself beyond dispute; and if, as some think, drunkenness is again increasing among us, the cause must be sought in the social conditions of a new time—a civilization fraught, perhaps, with quite as many evils as those of the old order.

But not only in holiday time did Dickens live with extraordinary gusto; at his desk he was often in the highest spirits. Behold how he pictured himself, one day at Broadstairs, when he was writing *Chuzzlewit*. "In a bay-window in a one-pair sits, from nine o'clock to one, a gentleman with rather long hair and no neck-cloth, who writes and grins, as if he thought he were very funny indeed. At one he disappears, presently emerges from a bathing-machine, and may be seen, a kind of salmon-colour porpoise, splashing about in the ocean. After that, he may be viewed in another bay-window on the ground-floor eating a strong lunch; and after that, walking a dozen miles or so, or lying on his back on the sand reading a book. Nobody bothers him, unless they know he is disposed to be talked to, and I am told he is very comfortable indeed. He's

as brown as a berry, and they *do* say he is as good as a small fortune to the innkeeper, who sells beer and cold punch." Here is the secret of such work as that of Dickens; it is done with delight—done (in a sense) easily, done with the mechanism of mind and body in splendid order. Even so did Scott write, though more rapidly and with less conscious care; his chapter finished before the world had got up to breakfast. Later, Dickens produced novels less excellent with much more of mental strain. The effects of age could not have shown themselves so soon, but for the unfortunate waste of energy involved in his non-literary labours.

Travel was always a great enjoyment to him, and when on the Continent he largely appreciated the spirit of life dissimilar to that of England. His *Pictures from Italy* are not of great value either for style or information; there are better things in his private letters written whilst he travelled than in any volume. For Italy he had no intellectual preparation; he saw everything merely with the eyes of intelligence and good-humour. Switzerland and France gave him a better opportunity. Very noticeable is the justice he does to the French character. As a proof of this, and of the fact that his genius did not desert him when he crossed the Channel, nothing could be better than his description of M. Beaucourt, the proprietor of a house he

rented at Boulogne. It is a picture—to be put together out of various anecdotes and sketches—really wonderful for its charm. In this little French bourgeois the great novelist had found a man after his own heart—loyal, mirthful, sweet-natured, and made only more likeable by traits especially amusing to an Englishman. "I see little of him now, as, all things being *bien arrangées*, he is delicate of appearing. His wife has been making a trip in the country during the last three weeks, but (as he mentioned to me with his hat in his hand) it was necessary that he should remain here, to be continually at the disposition of the tenant of the property. (The better to do this, he has had roaring dinner-parties of fifteen daily; and the old woman who milks the cows has been fainting up the hill, under vast burdens of champagne.)" And what could be more apt, more beautiful, than the words which describe M. Beaucourt as he retires from Dickens's presence, after a little dialogue in which he has shown all the gentle goodness of his heart? "He backed himself down the avenue with his cap in his hand, as if he were going to back himself straight into the evening star, without the ceremony of dying first."

This was at the time of the Anglo-French alliance in the Russian war. How just he could be under less favourable circumstances, and how strongly in contrast with that peculiarly offensive

type, the supercilious Englishman abroad, appears in an account of his experiences in leaving Italy by the Austrian frontier. "The Austrian police are very strict, but they really know how to do business, and they do it. And if you treat them like gentlemen they will always respond. . . . The thing being done at all, could not be better done, or more politely—though I dare say if I had been sucking a gentish cane all the time, or talking in English to my compatriots, it might not unnaturally have been different." Dickens could always hold his own as a man among men. At all times he was something more than a writer of books; in this respect, as in literary genius, establishing his claim of brotherhood with Fielding and with Scott.

Reading his life, it is with much satisfaction that we come to his last appearance as a public entertainer. The words with which he took leave of his audience at St. James's Hall have frequently been quoted; they breathe a sense of relief and hopefulness very pathetic in the knowledge of what followed. "In but two short weeks from this time I hope that you may enter, in your own homes, on a new series of readings at which my assistance will be indispensable; but from these garish lights I vanish now for evermore, with a heartfelt, grateful, respectful, affectionate farewell." The garish lights had done their work upon him, but he did not recognize it; he ima-

gined that he had but to sit down in his house at Gadshill, and resume the true, the honourable occupation of his life, with assurance that before long all would be well with him in mind and body. It was too late, and the book he promised to his hearers remains in our hands a fragment.

Throughout the pages of *Edwin Drood* there is premonition of the end. Whether it came of feeble health; whether of the melancholy natural in one who has just closed a definite epoch of his life, or merely of the theme he had chosen, there broods over this interrupted writing a shadow of mortality; not oppressive; a shadow as of the summer eventide, descending with peaceful hush. We are in and about the old minster of a quiet English town; among the old graves, to which our attention is constantly directed. It is touching to read that final chapter, which must have brought back to the writer's mind the days long past, when, a little boy, he read and dreamt amid the scenes he was now describing. There is no gloom; he shows us such a brilliant morning as, after a lifetime, will yet linger in the memory from days of earliest childhood. He was tired, but not despondent; true to himself, he saw the sunshine above the world's dark places, nourished the hope of something beyond this present. "Changes of glorious light from moving boughs, songs of birds, scents from gardens, woods, and

fields . . . penetrate into the cathedral, subdue its earthly odour, and preach the Resurrection and the Life." It was no form of words; what he wrote in that solemn mood assuredly he believed. Whatever his mistakes and his defects, insincerity had no place among them.

For him, there could be no truer epitaph than the words written by Carlyle on hearing he was dead:

"The good, the gentle, high-gifted, ever-friendly, noble Dickens—every inch of him an honest man".

Born 1812 - Childhood - Education -
Beadnells - Reporter (Pge 39) Hogarths -
Marriage 1836 - Hogarth family -
Mary - (Little Nell) - Georgiana - Kate;

1836 - First sketches - Publishers - Friends
Extreme temperament - Characters from life
{Satarist - Caricaturist - Reformer - (Pge 39)
{Read 131-2} Knowledge of Eng
Books - reviews
Became famous - immediately

Family demands enormous -
children in close succession -

Love for theatricals - Many plays
produced from his works at the time they were
written - Much miserably poor plays in
Troubles with publishers

1842 - 1st trip to America -
Martin Chuzzelwit" failure 1st mon so - Sent here to
America

1856 Separation from wife -
Foolish letters - published
Public theatrical readings - criticized
1867 - 2nd Amer. trip -

Tame - Forster - W. J. Ley -
Carlyle
Thackery -
Leslie Stephen
Geo. Gissing (Best review of his book + as an arti
Wm L. Phelps (in "Happiness" "Love
Chesterton
Santayana - Splendid essay.
A. Ed. Newton — Likes Trollope better - admits inferiority -
Dimnet refers to him in
"The Art of Thinking"

Humor - soul of his work - as a writer of true farce has never been excelled

Read chapter on style

Read page 3-5-7+8-11-17

look up Hogarth

art of Thinking —— Angellier

Read Pge 95 – last paragraph

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